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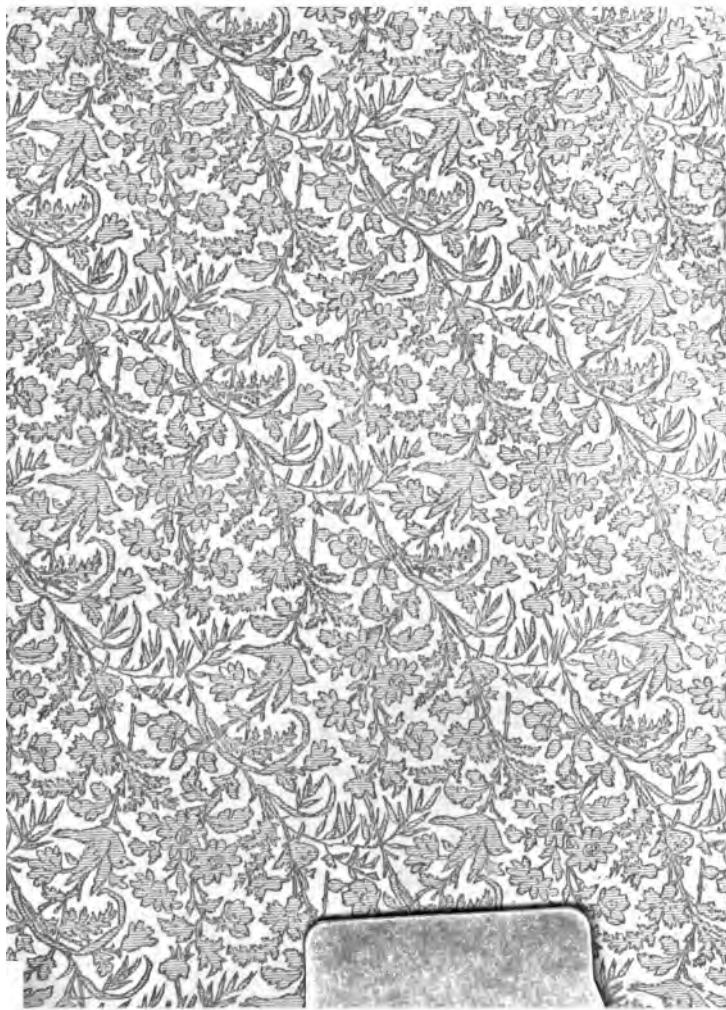
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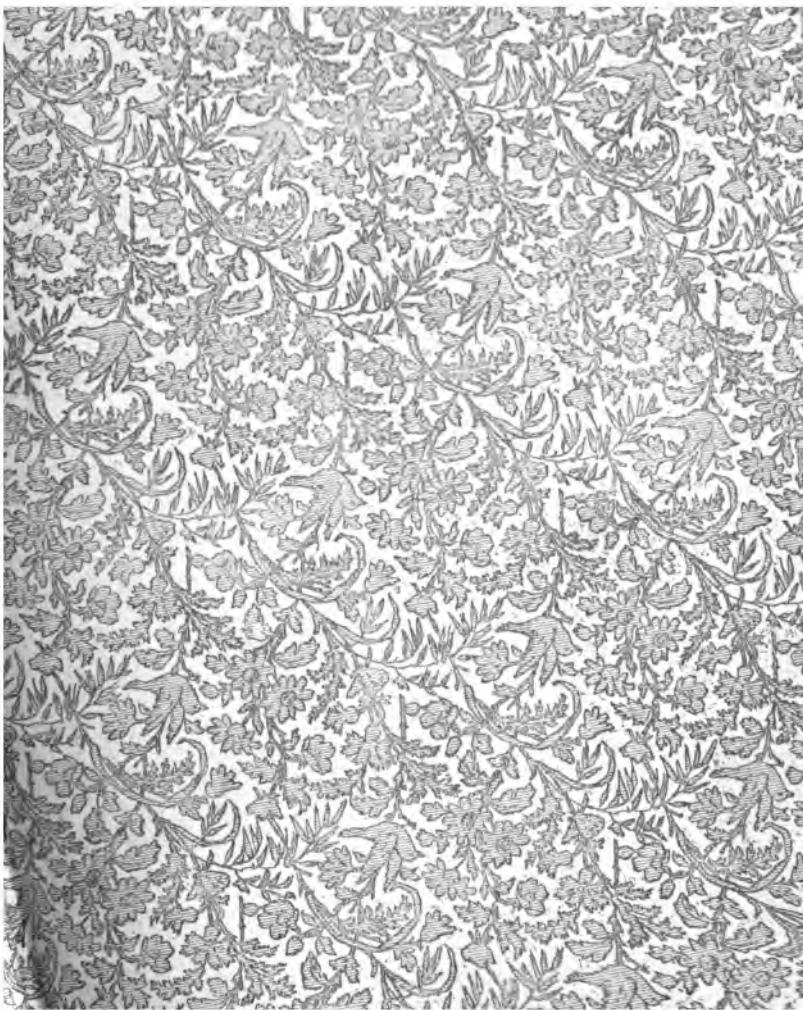
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THE OLD WAGGON; *OR,* THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW.

BY
A. RYCROFT
TAYLOR.









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or

THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW.

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"It was indeed, no other than Mr. Jarvey in the flesh."—See page 205.

THE OLD WAGGON;

OR,

THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW.

BY

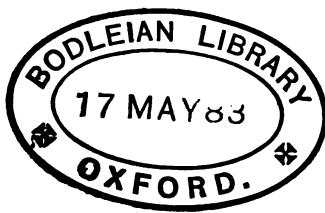
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THE OLD WAGGON;
OR,
THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW.

CHAPTER I.

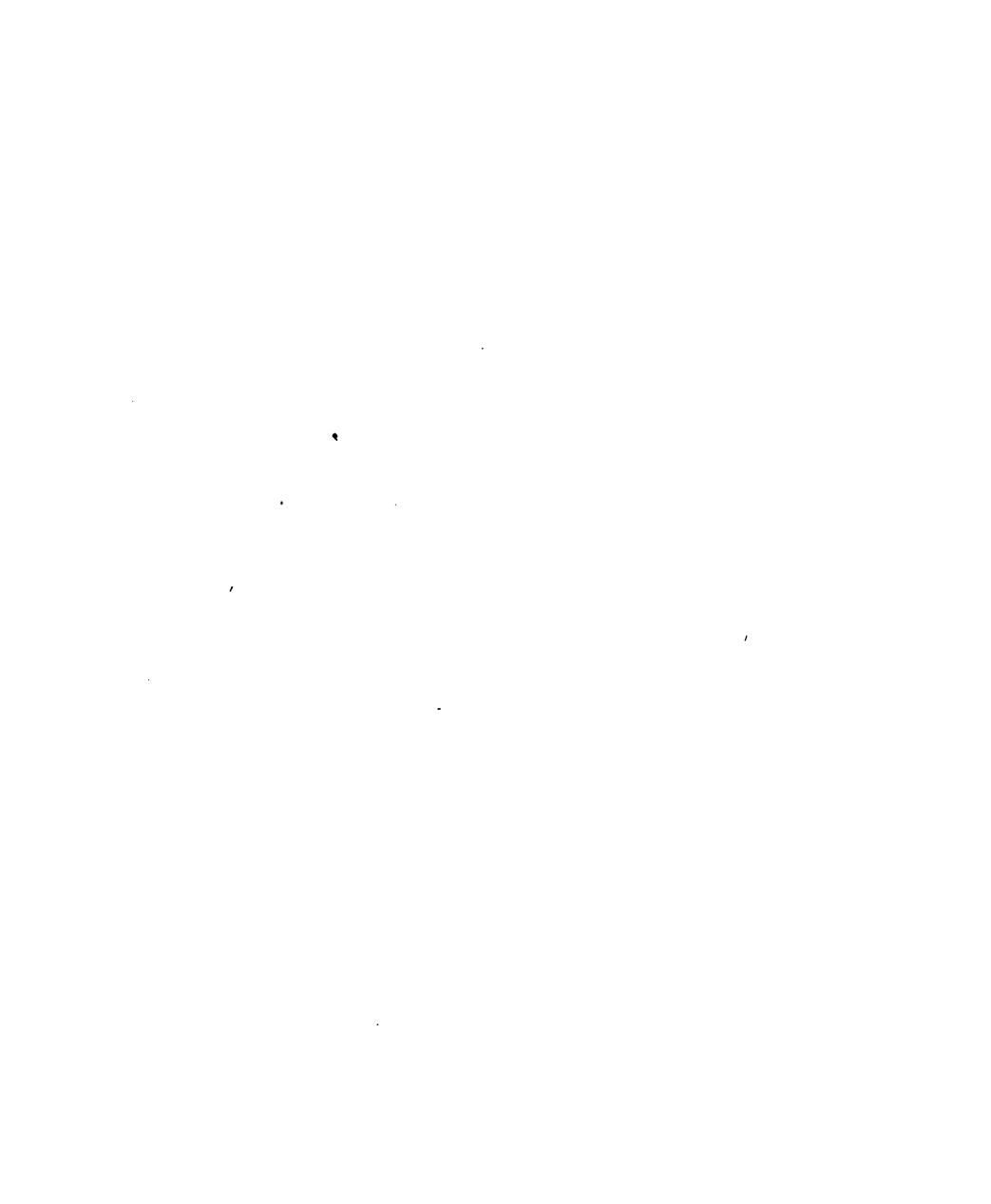
THE LAST NIGHT IN THE OLD WAGGON.

ON an autumn evening, some twenty years ago, there stood at an angle of a leafy lane in Cheshire, an old yellow-painted caravan. Like the fading leaves of the spreading chestnut tree that overshadowed it, and the foliage with which it was surrounded, the old waggon had seen its best days, and might be said to be in the autumnal stage of its

existence. Unlike the leaves, which declined in glowing tints of red and brown, the old waggon presented a dingy, weather-stained appearance that somewhat detracted from the picturesqueness of the scene. In years gone by, before the startling novelties which are now characteristic of fairs and wakes had been introduced, the old yellow-painted caravan, with its collection of curiosities, living and inanimate, had constituted a penny exhibition, and had been considered cheap at that. In later times, it had degenerated into a halfpenny show, and had been held by the fastidious in such matters, to be dear at that. Truth to tell, the old waggon was as far behind the age in those days, as a stage coach would be in the present year of grace.



"On the steps of the waggon, a fair-haired girl sat hushing a baby to sleep."—See page 13.



Such as it was, it stood in a shady nook at an angle of that leafy lane on that autumn evening, and, beneath the crimson clouds of a glorious sunset, was conspicuous for its shabbiness.

Behind the waggon, on a hedge skirting a cornfield, some articles of clothing that had been washed that day, were drying ; before the waggon, on a strip of green sward, a large bony draught horse, and a small fat performing pony were nibbling the grass in company ; and on the steps of the waggon, a fair-haired girl sat hushing a baby to sleep. The girl had seen seventeen summers ; the baby but one, it having been born at the beginning of the previous winter. The baby resembled all other babies, inasmuch as it made a pretence of going

to sleep with its thumb in its mouth and its eyes wide open ; the resemblance being carried still farther, when, after much hushing it was supposed to be slumbering peacefully, it took its thumb out of its mouth, pronounced the personal pronoun I several times, and crowed lustily over that accomplishment. Like all other babies, however, it had to give in to circumstances, and circumstances being too much for it, it closed its eyes in earnest, and was at length carried into the caravan, laid in a box that answered for a cradle, and was covered up and tucked in for the time being.

“ There, you little puss, I hope you’ll sleep a long time,” said the girl. “ I wouldn’t be without you for the world, but I can spare you for an hour or two very well to-night.” Then,

turning towards several cages, in which a number of small animals were squeaking and grunting for their suppers, she stamped her foot and exclaimed :—

“ Hush ! every one of you.”

On which they crept into their several corners and held their peace. A parrot, however, deemed that a favourable opportunity for putting in a word, and forthwith croaked :—

“ All in to begin.”

“ Polly, I am ashamed of you, when baby's asleep,” said the girl reproachfully.

“ All over for this time,” croaked Polly in a subdued voice, perhaps just a trifle ashamed of herself.

The girl took a peep at her face in a small looking-glass that hung at one side of the

caravan, and smoothed her hair with her hand, which was quite unnecessary, for her hair was as smooth and neat as it could be.

“ Dear, how I shall miss the old waggon ! And after wishing so often to get away from it, too ! But it has been our home, and it will seem very hard to have to turn out of it,” she said, going to the door and looking up at the crimson and gold with which the heavens were flooded.

“ Very hard,” she repeated. “ What a time Charlie is.” The last remark being made in rather an impatient tone, as she sat down on the steps again and glanced at the glowing sunset.

Meg was only a showman’s daughter, and yet she was very pretty. To look upon her

sweet fresh face, it were hard to conceive that her life had been spent in travelling from town to town, from village to village, in an old caravan. Her manner and general appearance seemed so incompatible with the sphere of life to which, rightly or wrongly, she belonged, that to the casual observer it would have occurred that her position in connection with the old waggon was only a temporary one. Not so, however. A showman's daughter she was, and as such she had honestly endeavoured to do her duty. But she had for several years aspired to something better than the life she was leading. There was something within her that suggested at times a possible state of existence that was so far removed from the pale of her present surroundings, that she was

compelled to put a check on her thoughts lest, in giving full play to them, she rendered herself unsettled and unhappy. There was not a particle of affectation or false pride about her, yet Meg, the showman's daughter, had looked forward to the attainment of a higher position on the world's stage than she had hitherto been identified with. She had been very unlike other girls in her station. She had been a keen observer, and had at an early age discovered that in many respects she was not as other people. This had led to her stopping children occasionally (as, on their way to school, they passed through the fair ground in the different towns and villages) for the purpose of having a peep at their lesson books. This again had led to her

saving up her pence for the purchasing of small educational works, which, once obtained, she struggled with until she had acquired a store of knowledge that was a constant source of pleasure to her, and which caused the old showman to look upon Meg as one of the wonders of the age. But what was of even more importance than her book learning, she had taken a fancy to slipping into churches and chapels on Sundays in the towns they had visited, and there she had heard words of wisdom by which she would profit more in the days to come, than by all the works which men have invented.

As Meg sat on the steps of the caravan, looking up at the clouds, an expression of sadness stole over her face. She was thinking of

those whom she would see never more in this world. Within twelve months she had lost both father and mother. Nearly a year had passed away since her mother had been laid beneath the sod; scarcely a week had gone since her father had been carried to his last resting place. Her mother, though she could not be judged by a very high standard, had had her good qualities, and Meg could not remember many harsh words or beatings against her. Her father had been a fair specimen of the rough and ready showman of those days. He had taken life as he had found it, had worked hard at his calling, drank more than was good for him, had never been very choice in the selection of his language, and had been guilty of actions which Meg had not

approved of ; yet he had not been bad-hearted, he had many a time and oft yielded to generous impulses, and—he had thought the world of Meg. In a word, they had led lives that had differed very much from the life she had heard sketched in the churches and chapels, but they had been her parents, and being lost to her for ever, she thought of them regretfully.

But she was thinking not only of her lost parents just then. Her thoughts were also of the old waggon that would soon pass into the hands of strangers, and of associations that were about to be broken up.

For Meg had made the discovery since her father's death, that a person, whose name was John Jarvey, held a bond as security for a debt, which gave him the power to seize the caravan

and its contents whenever it might suit him to do so. This she had gathered from a letter she had found in her father's pocket-book, and which contained a threat that unless a certain sum of money was forthcoming at once, this John Jarvey would take possession of the worldly effects of Michael Merriman, showman. Meg had had no previous knowledge of this debt, or the power which the person of the name of Jarvey had held over her father. She had been aware for some time that her father was in difficulties, as the result of a falling off in the takings, but she had not supposed that matters were as bad as they were. On coming across Mr. Jarvey's letter, however, she did not hesitate to take the only step which her conscience dictated, and which she knew to be

right. She therefore wrote to Mr. Jarvey, informing him of her father's death, and intimating that the caravan would remain where it stood for a few days until she heard from him. The morning's post had brought the reply—very badly written—conveying the information that Mr. Jarvey would repair to that particular part of the country with the least possible delay, and might, in short, be expected sometime in the course of the evening of that day. And so Meg had sent her brother Charlie, aged ten, as far as the toll-bar on the high road, and had insisted upon his keeping a sharp look-out for Mr. Jarvey, in order that he might have no difficulty in finding his way to the spot where the waggon was located ; a mission which the boy had undertaken in a very sulky spirit, for

he had no notion of giving up their property so quietly, and would have preferred to have either eluded the vigilance of Mr. Jarvey—whom he looked upon as a remorseless enemy—or to have stood up for their rights and have fought for them to the bitter end. Charlie had as yet evinced no particular liking for slipping into churches and chapels, and his knowledge of the requirements of law and equity was very limited.

It was on account of this expected visit on the part of Mr. Jarvey, that Meg had said she could spare the baby for an hour or two very well, and it was for Mr. Jarvey and Charlie that she was waiting, as she sat on the steps of the waggon, looking up at the curious effects in cloudland.

The sun had gone down in the west, and the glowing hues in the sky had changed to cool grey shades, with here and there a roseate streak, ere Meg heard voices in the lane—a gruff voice, such as might belong to a person of the name of Jarvey, and a small, piping voice which she recognised as Charlie's—and the next moment the pair turned the angle, and stood out to view.

The owner of the gruff voice was a short, thick-set man, with the smallest possible allowance of throat, a knotty, hard-grained face that was blue with perpetual shaving, a sharp, penetrating pair of eyes, ears that appeared to be preternaturally large on account of his hair being cropped so short, and whose dress and general appearance did not speak very loudly

in his favour. That was Mr. Jarvey. Charlie, a curly-headed lad, and tall for his age, might have been identified by any one, owing to the resemblance which his features bore to Meg's.

“This is Mr. Jarvey, Meg,” said the boy, “and I’ve been telling him that as I’ve had to wait at the tollbar such a time for him, I hope he’ll not be hard with us. You and me, and our baby brother, have got to live somewhere and somehow, and I’ve told him he musn’t be hard-hearted, and turn us out of the old waggon, which is the only place we’ve got to live in. But he hasn’t said whether he will or he won’t be hard-hearted, so just you have a turn at him, Meg.”

“Sharp boy,” said Mr. Jarvey, who seemed to enjoy the lad’s prattling.

"My brother means well, but he is young, and you must excuse him, Mr. Jarvey," said Meg.

"It's all right ; words don't break no bones," replied that gentleman, who thereupon walked round the caravan on a tour of inspection.

"Precious old," he remarked, on coming to the steps again. "Wot's inside?"

Meg pushed open the door for him to enter, and followed Mr. Jarvey in, with Charlie at her heels.

There was a small stage at one end of the waggon, which accommodated a diorama, and also afforded room for placing the cages and boxes containing the specimens, dead and living, during the time of exhibition.

Mr. Jarvey pulled aside the curtain, and

screwed up one eye as he closely scrutinised the worn old painting.

“Ha! Panyarma—Russian war, or summat. That ain’t worth much,” was the criticism bestowed on that work of art.

“Isn’t it? You should see it when it’s lit up and worked through,” exclaimed Charlie, indignantly.

“Hush, Charlie,” said Meg.

“Wot’s in these cages? Ain’t that a squir’l?” enquired Mr. Jarvey.

“Yes, that’s a squirrel, and a beauty it is. And that’s a jackal—the jackal, or lion’s provider. It runs before the lion and scents out its prey. The jackal is the only animal in the forest that the lion won’t devour,” piped Charlie, in imitation of his departed father’s style.

“Lor! Think o’ that. The on’y animal wot the lion won’t dewour! That ought to be worth summat,” said Mr. Jarvey.

“I should think it was,” said Charlie. “And so’s the monkeys, and so’s the birds, and so’s the stuffed curiosities, and as for the parrot—why, there never was such a parrot as Polly, you know.”

“Wasn’t there now?” said Mr. Jarvey.

Not a word said Meg, who stood quietly by, until such time as Mr. Jarvey should be ready to make known his intentions, which was not until it had grown quite dark and the lamp had to be lighted, for he examined every nook and corner of the caravan, and peeped into every cage, box, and receptacle, until he had satisfied himself that he had missed nothing, and had

possessed himself of all the information he required.

"Now," said that worthy, "you're not a bit like old Mick was in the face, but I'll be bound you're not short o' sense. He wasn't short o' sense, though he got down i' the world, somehow. Thereby, as his gal, I expect you're not short o' sense. You can read?"

"Yes."

"Then run your eyes over that dockymint," taking Michael Merriman's bond from his pocket-book, and handing it to her. "Take your time over it; there's no hurry," on which Mr. Jarvey took a short pipe from his waistcoat pocket, lighted it, and blew a cloud of smoke into the parrot's cage, much to the disgust of the bird.

"Not a bad sort of a place to live in," said Mr. Jarvey to himself. "A stove with a chimbley to it, and every conwenience, I see. The show line ain't my line, or I don't know whether I wouldn't run this waggin myself for a bit."

Meg read the paper carefully through, and handed it back.

"I have no doubt it is all right," she said. "I knew nothing of it until I found your letter after father's death."

"Wery likely."

"Would you mind telling me what the debt was for?" she asked.

"Borrered money," was the sententious reply.

"Poor father was unfortunate, I know," said Meg.

"And then he went an' died, which didn't mend things," said Mr. Jarvey.

Meg made no reply to the last remark. Mr. Jarvey took his pipe out of his mouth, eyed the girl keenly, and asked abruptly, though not unkindly for him, "Wot are you going to do, you and him, and the babby?"

"I scarcely know yet," said Meg. "But God will take care of us."

"Eh?—Oh! Ah!—God will take care of us. Heard that in a church or a burying-ground, or somewheres, didn't you?"

"I have heard it often at church, and I believe it is true," said Meg.

"I ain't a-going to say it ain't, but my adwice is take care of yourselves if you can. This ain't a world where folks care for other folks

like they care for themselves. Leastwise, if it is, I never noticed it. But that's your look out. Now, do you dispute this dockymenent?"

"Say yes, Meg," whispered Charlie. But her reply was simply—

"No."

"Because you can if you like. Maybe you'd like to show it somebody?"

"It would do no good if I did, I suppose."

"Not a bit of it."

"Then perhaps you will say what you are going to do, Mr. Jarvey," said Meg.

"And perhaps you'll not be hard on us, Mr. Jarvey," chimed in Charlie, dolefully, whose spirits had gone down terribly.

"Hard on you!" exclaimed Mr. Jarvey.
"Why, when the horse and pony and waggin

and all that's in it is sold they won't pay wot's owing. But you've come out just as I thought you would, Miss—not short o' sense; and so I'm a-going to tell you wot I'm a-going to do with you."

As Mr. Jarvey did no such thing, but quietly resumed his pipe, Meg jogged his memory by saying—

"Yes, Mr. Jarvey?"

"Ha!—Well, I'm a-going to let you take your clothes, and the pots and pans, and such things. And—I'll—well, I'll give you a couple o' pound to start life with. Now, is *that* being hard with you?"

"But you won't turn us out of the waggon, will you, Mr. Jarvey?" asked Charlie, piteously.

"Now you let your sister speak, my lad.

She ain't short o' sense, and she'll know better than you wot reply to make."

"I don't think you are any harder than you can help, Mr. Jarvey. We will thankfully take what you will give us," said Meg.

"Well said, Miss. And if there's any favour-ite animal you'd like to take along wi' you, I'm not again that. But it musn't be the lion's purwider—the on'y animal i' the forest wot the lion won't dewour—*that* goes along wi' me," said Mr. Jarvey, glancing at the attenuated specimen of the jackal tribe that occupied one of the cages.

"May we take Polly?" asked Meg.

"Aye, I'll throw in Polly. Parrots is plentiful," was the answer. "Now I don't want to hurry you, but time is money to me. Suppose

you clear out for—wherever you're a-going to—first thing in the morning."

"Say some time before night, please. I shall have so much to think about before we can set off for anywhere," pleaded Meg.

"Wery well. *Now*, have I been hard on you," once more demanded the magnanimous Mr. Jarvey.

Charlie thought Mr. Jarvey had been very hard on them, but deemed it wise to keep his opinion to himself. Meg had anticipated the worst, so she quietly remarked,—

"No. You might have taken everything: you have the power."

"So I might; but I'm a regler soft'un, I am. So you take your clothes and things, and the parrot. And I'm not to a monkey, or a squir'l,

but the lion's purwider goes wi' me—that's valuable. I'll look you up to-morrow, sometime." With which, Mr. Jarvey took his leave for the night.

"I've a good mind to knock both ends of the drum in, and drown the jackal," exclaimed Charlie, as soon as his remorseless enemy was out of sight. Meg had tears in her eyes, but she forced them back. "Never mind, Charlie, dear; we shall manage very well, I daresay, when—[she faltered here]—we have got over the breaking up. Come, we'll have some supper, and it shall be a hot one for the last night in the old waggon."

Before sunset next day, Meg, and Charlie, and the baby had taken their departure for Manchester—the most likely place Meg could

think of under the circumstances ; the parrot, and an old chest containing all their possessions, having been entrusted to a carrier with instructions to leave them at the place he put up at, until called for.

The evening of that day also saw Mr. Jarvey installed in the old waggon, where, as monarch of all he surveyed, he smoked his pipe with a peculiar relish, and gazed with unbounded satisfaction on “the on'y animal i' the forest wot the lion won't dewour.”





CHAPTER II.

IN LITTLE BACK QUEER STREET.

FT was Christmas Eve in the City of Manchester.

There was no disputing it. Every date case in each particular office, public and private, proclaimed the fact, and each and every almanac, from the dearest, replete with valuable information, to the cheapest, abounding in fearful forecasts and awful hieroglyphics, afforded corroborative evidence. The market people frankly acknowledged it by purchasing, for very little money, forests of holly, and laurel, and mistletoe, which, in their hands, became

such dear commodities, that people had to screw up their courage to the highest possible pitch before asking for sixpennyworth, whilst the needy customer who obtained half-a-dozen sprigs and one berry for a penny, had his coin jerked into the till so savagely, that he felt more like a convicted felon than an inoffensive Christian who hoped to salute the happy morn an hour or two hence. The tradesmen testified to the near approach of the happiest, gladdest day in all the year, by the tempting display they made of their wares, and the festive appearance which the decorations imparted to their premises. Porters and errand boys gratuitously advertised the event by the expressive twist they gave their countenances, and if that failed to attract the desired attention to the

requirements of the season, tipped their caps, and grinned from ear to ear. People who professed they took "very little of anything in a regular way," helped up the belief that Christmas was at hand by taking a great deal of something in an irregular way, that seemed to confuse them slightly as the evening wore on. At the railway stations, in the markets, in the streets, in the shops, in the homes of the rich and poor alike, people generally acknowledged, with more or less of gratitude, that the festival of the holly-crowned King had commenced. The weather alone held out against it, and disputed as stubborn a fact as the calendar contained.

Such weather at Christmas had not been known for years. The oldest inhabitant said

so, and, as one whose opinions were frequently chronicled in the newspapers, his decision was held to be conclusive, and the weather was condemned accordingly.

The weather ! It was exactly the reverse of that the authors of Christmas annuals had described so graphically, whilst writing in their shirt sleeves in the dog-days, and caused an uneasy feeling to creep over those fabricators as they imagined a few of the epithets the public would bestow on them. The weather ! There was not a Christmas card but what was in a profuse state of perspiration ; there was not a stationer's window but what was steamed to a degree that children flattening their noses against it, strained their eyes in vain in search of the novelties therein exhibited. As for the

butchers, the poulters, the fishmongers, they were driven to the verge of frenzy on account of it.

It was mild, murky, and wet. A species of fog, a sort of forty-second cousin of a London Particular, hung over the city, and a Scotch mist descending on it, enveloped everything and everybody, and rendered the pedestrian's life a burden to him for the time being. In very truth, Manchester was looking at its worst, and no particular part of it more so than Little Back Queer Street.

Situated in the heart of the city, Little Back Queer Street was the narrowest, crookedest, most ill-conditioned thoroughfare to be met with in a day's march. It was a street in which none but the poor, the shiftless, the reckless, or

worse, would have sought refuge. Notwithstanding, it probably contained more inhabitants than any other street of its dimensions. And it must be recorded in its favour, as an instance of its popularity with a certain class, that a room, or flat, or house was seldom to let in its entire length.

In years gone by, it had had the worst of reputations, but a transformation had been begun, several fine blocks of warehouses having sprung into existence on the sites of former residential premises of a questionable character, and Little Back Queer Street was beginning to assume a business-like air which had considerably raised the value of the remaining property. The fine new warehouses were undoubtedly an improvement on the rotten tenements they had

replaced, but they dwarfed the wretched dwellings on the opposite side of the way terribly, and did not add one jot to the comfort of their internal arrangements.

In Little Back Queer Street, in a howling wilderness of a garret that was approached by a twisting, creaking flight of stairs at the end of a passage rejoicing in the appellation of No. 2 Court, Meg and Charlie and the baby had found a habitation when, through a reverse of fortune, the old waggon and its contents had become the property of Mr. Jarvey. Meg had not been particularly fascinated with either the garret or the neighbourhood, but the room was cheap, and there being nothing between it and the sky—a stack of chimneys and a nest of sparrows excepted—it might be said to be far

from the madding crowd, and made up in its one quality of retirement what it lacked in other respects, and was perhaps as good a place to live in—or die in, for that matter—as any to be met with at the price.

Rather more than two years had gone since then, and that melancholy Christmas Eve—from a meteorological point of view—found Meg seated by the dullest of fires, stitching away by candle-light at some work she was anxious to finish and take home, for the all-important reason that she wanted the money she would have fairly earned, to purchase a few necessaries, and perhaps a trifling luxury, for the day on which, of all others in the year, most people provide a feast of some description.

At nineteen, Meg was prettier even than she

was when seen in the glowing sunset as she sat on the steps of the caravan two years before. But the air of Little Back Queer Street had evidently not agreed with her, for she was very pale, and she had dark lines under her eyes that were suggestive of indifferent living, and anxious thoughts. Still, poor seamstress though she was, with the lightest of purses and many wants, she stitched away with a cheerful air, and hummed a little song over her work.

Toady—the baby, having developed into a three-year-old, had become respectively Thomas, Tom, Tommy, Toady—was seated on the floor, caressing a doll which, having been carved out of a solid piece of wood, defied the ravages of time, and flourished in

immortal strength with a full complement of limbs, an entire nose, and the average number of eyes. Charlie, much to Meg's discomfiture, had taken kindly to the streets, and was leading a vagabond life as a retailer of newspapers, which he disposed of at the market price, and as much more as he could get on wet nights, or when the contents' bill contained items of more than ordinary interest. Charlie was out then with the evening edition of the papers, but the latter were at that moment resting on the ground, whilst the former played toss half-penny with a kindred spirit on the flags behind the *Guardian* Office.

The room was scantily furnished, but, like the cottage in the poem, “ ‘Twas wondrous neat and clean.” Not a thing was out of its place,

everything was in apple pie order, and the parrot occupied a position of state on a table by the window.

It was very quiet, and Toady being busily engaged hushing the woodenest of dolls to sleep, Meg could hear the slightest noise in the street below. She was quick to detect foot-steps on the creaking stairs, and, with a rush of colour to her pale cheeks, she turned her head towards the door as the owner of the thickest boots that could be obtained for money down, entered the room, doffed his cap, threw it on the floor, and said—

“Good evening, Miss Meg. I’ve taken the liberty of bringing you a bit of holly to stick about the place to make it look like Christmas. It’s awful dear stuff this year, but it’s cheap at

the price if it makes one corner of Little Back Queer Street look a bit more seasonable."

"You are very kind, Mr. Damper, and I am very much obliged——" began Meg.

"Now, don't call me Mis-ter Damper. I hate it. Dan's the name I go by, and it's good enough for me. Why don't you call me Dan? Mis-ter Damper don't sound a bit friendly."

"Well, Dan then. I am very much obliged to you," said Meg, with a smile.

"That's better. Though I wish you wouldn't be so awfully much obliged for every little thing I do. What is there I wouldn't do for you?"

"Yes, I know," said Meg, bending her head over her work as she stitched away at it.

"There you are, slaving with your needle day and night to earn what hardly keeps the



"Now, could you do a better thing than make up your mind?"—See page 54.

life in you. And you might be a honest man's wife any day. Aye, the wife of a man who would work for you till he dropt, though I say it as oughtn't."

Meg quietly stitched away at her work.

"Look at this little chap," said the man, taking Toady on his knee.

"Res, rook at me," said Toady, delighted as Dan rocked him on his knee.

Meg raised her head to smile at the child, and resumed her work.

"Look at this little chap," said Dan. "What's to become of him? And what's to become of Charlie if he's allowed to roam about the streets picking up bad language and worse ways? Why, as your husband, I should be a father to 'em, and should bring 'em up to a trade, and

see they shaped for honest men, or I'd know why."

Still Meg answered nothing.

"I know I'm not a gentleman ; and I'm not a swell, and don't want to be. I'm a working man, that's what I am. I earn thirty-five shillings a week, and have twenty pound put by. Why, I could furnish a nest for you and me and Toady and Charlie in no time. Now, could you do a better thing than make up your mind on Christmas Eve, Meg ? I ask you that."

Dan Damper was a fair specimen of a plain, unvarnished British workman. About seven or eight-and-twenty, he was tall, wiry, strong of limb, capable of any quantity of hard work, and was as honest as the daylight. He was by no means bad looking, despite the fact that an

uncontrollable head of hair gave him the appearance of a wild man of the woods occasionally ; and beneath a rough exterior there beat a heart such as is said to be “more than coronets.” He was a joiner by trade.

“ Now could you do a better thing than make up your mind on Christmas Eve, Meg ? I ask you that,” he repeated, as Meg kept her eyes on her work.

“ Dan,” she said, raising her head, “ you are the best, the only friend I have in the world. Don’t press me unfairly on this of all the nights in the year. What you wish cannot be, believe me.”

“ Then you’ve somebody else in your mind,” said Dan quickly.

“ No, nor in my heart,” replied Meg, looking him straight in the face.

“Do you mean to say you haven’t a sweet-heart?”

“Never had such a thing in my life,” said Meg, with a smile.

“Honour bright?”

“Honour bright.”

“Then there’s a chance for me yet. I’ll let you off to-night. I can wait.”

Turning it off in this way, Dan threw Toady up to the ceiling and caught him several times, put the child on the floor again, and said—

“Well, I’ll just stick these sprigs of holly about for you.”

Dan was one of those individuals who must either sing or whistle over their work, and during the time he was occupied with the evergreens he whistled “Cheer, boys, cheer” (evi-

dently a favourite tune), at least a dozen times through.

“There,” he exclaimed when he had finished, “that looks a bit like Christmas, anyway. Now, I suppose it would be a liberty if I sent in some little thing, such as a nice plump goose, or something of that sort, for to-morrow, eh ?”

“I hope you will do nothing of the kind,” said Meg, earnestly. “We shall not want for a dinner.”

“Put my foot in it again,” said Dan, ruffling his hair, which did not need it. “Well, there is nothing like being independent, if it isn’t carried too far.”

“No, you have not put your foot in it, and I thank you for your kind intentions.”

“Ha!—I’d like to be thanked for something

better than intentions. I don't think much of intentions unless they are carried out. I suppose I may look in to-morrow night and bring my pipe. I shall have a grand tale to tell Toady here."

"Yes, do," said Meg.

"Res, do," said Toady.

Dan thereupon took his departure, and Meg, having finished her work, made it up into a parcel ready for taking home. But before she could go out she had Toady to put to bed. Pulling a mattress from behind a screen that hid from view her own bed, she laid it on the floor and made up a bed on it for Charley and Toady. Having undressed the latter, washed his face and hands, and heard him say his prayers, she put him under the clothes, tucked

him in, and bade him go to sleep like a good boy.

“Res,” said Toady, and, being on his best behaviour, he closed his eyes, and was sound asleep by the time Meg was ready to go out.

Meg had only a small sum to draw for her work, and part of it was required for the rent. With a view to scheming out of it some little treat for Christmas Day, however, she had hurried on with her work in order that she might take it home and receive payment for it that evening. Her disappointment may be imagined, therefore, when she found that the person for whom she had made the garment had gone from home, and that she would have to wait a few days for the money. Wet (for the drizzling rain still descended on the city)

and dispirited, she returned to the garret, where she found Charlie drying himself before the fire.

“ Hallo, Meg ! Have you brought something good for to-morrow ?”

“ No, Charlie.”

“ What ! ” exclaimed the boy, turning round and looking her full in the face.

“ Don’t shout at me in that way, Charlie,” said Meg, gently. “ I have not got paid for my work. Have you done well to-night ?”

“ That I haven’t. Only sold a dozen and a half. People won’t scarcely look at papers on Christmas Eve. I never saw the likes of them. Haven’t you got *anything* extra, Meg ?”

“ No. Don’t be cross, Charlie dear. It is neither your fault nor mine. We shall not starve. Let us be thankful for that.”

“Starve! I should hope not. But is our Christmas dinner to be chair-knobs and pump-handles, like any other day?”

“I am afraid so, Charlie.”

“Then it’s a shame!” cried the boy passionately.

“What a lark!” croaked the parrot.





CHAPTER III.

MR. JARVEY'S CONSCIENCE TROUBLES HIM.

JR. JARVEY, who in an ordinary way resided in London, was in the habit of paying occasional visits to Manchester. These visits were paid to his mother, a lady over whose head seventy summers and quite as many winters had passed. Mrs. Jarvey was an upright woman in more senses than one. Despite her three-score years and ten, she was tall and straight, and, as a member of the United Methodist Free Church, she had a strict regard for all religious ordinances, and

attended the services of her church with a regularity which in one at her time of life was highly commendable.

Mrs. Jarvey had the advantage over her eldest son—she had another son and a daughter living—in that, though her face was withered and wrinkled, there was nothing knotty or hard grained about it, and was even pleasant to look upon ; a fact which leads to the conclusion that Mr. Jarvey must have inherited his countenance from Mr. Jarvey, senior, the late lamented. Mrs. Jarvey kept what is known in Lancashire as a fent shop, and resided in that part of Manchester called Islington. In an atmosphere that was rendered by no means salubrious, on account of the smoke that issued from the chimneys of the factories and works

with which that neighbourhood abounds, and in a street that was not (nor is, in all probability) remarkable for its cleanliness, Mrs. Jarvey was the owner of a freehold house and shop, in which she dwelt and transacted her business. Of all the shops in the street, Mrs. Jarvey's was the cleanest and neatest; and of all the dwellings, hers was the best furnished, though her household effects had seen long service and closely bordered on the antique. The framework of the shop was kept smart and bright by means of an annual coat of red paint, and the panes of glass in a high state of polish by the constant application of a wash-leather and a dry cloth. In the window, a seductive display of remnants of prints and calicoes was made, and in the shop, bundles of fents, and patches,

and twine filled numerous shelves, part of the counter, and a considerable portion of the floor. Behind the shop was Mrs. Jarvey's little parlour, neat and trim and comfortable, with a small window in it which commanded an uninterrupted view of the shop. In a shed at the back of the premises, the sorting—a dirty, gritty business—was carried on. A peculiarity of the business as conducted in the shop was, that everything was sold by weight. Be it a piece of half-a-dozen yards with a damage in it, a half-yard perfect, or a bundle of patches, it was placed in the scales, and disposed of at so much per pound. And a thriving, paying business it was.

With Mrs. Jarvey resided her daughter, a business-like young woman of thirty or so, who

was, in personal appearance, a second edition of her mother. Tom, the other son, who was a chip off the old block, and closely resembled the Mr. Jarvey already described, as far as looks and build went, attended to the outside part of the business, which consisted of picking up cheap lots of damaged and other goods, and contracting for the purchase of tab ends, string, waste paper, etc., among the warehouses. Being a married man, Tom lived with his wife and family in a house of his own.

The evening was far advanced, and Miss Jarvey, who had been attending to a somewhat fastidious customer, was tying up the bundles that had been under inspection, and clearing the counter previous to closing for the night.

“Mary,” called her mother from the little

back room, “put the shutters up, and shut the damp out. It’s not likely there’ll be any more customers to-night, with its being wet and Christmas Eve.”

“That’s what I am just going to do. But Mrs. Maggers has had half the bundles in the shop open, and they take some siding away,” replied Mary.

The counter cleared, it did not take long to put up the shutters, for the window was a small one. Another second would have seen the door locked, too, had not a man’s foot been inserted from the outside to prevent it being closed.

“Hold on, there,” exclaimed a gruff voice.

“It’s John!” said Mary, opening the door.

“Yes, it’s John, or what’s left of him. A

nice sort o' young woman you are to be locking out a member o' the family a night like this," said Mr. Jarvey, shaking himself to get rid of as much wet as possible before entering.

"Well, I am surprised. Mother, here's John come upon us like a clap of thunder, as usual," called Mary to her mother.

"Yes, mother, here's John. The prodigal son in search o' roast weal, or what he can catch. How are you?" said Mr. Jarvey, entering the little back parlour.

"You've come upon us rather sudden, John, but I'm glad to see you, lad. It's many a long year since you spent Christmas with your old mother."

"So it is. And that's just it. I thought I'd drop down on you to-night. Why, you're

looking blooming, old lady, and so is Mary."

"I can't complain, John, considering my time of life. But my rheumatics is bad to-night, on account of the damp. How thin you've gone, John. Have you been ill?"

"Ra-ther! Had a regler set-to wi' the fever. Thought I was booked for that place where the traveller don't come back no more."

"I hope it will be blessed to your good, John."

"I hope so, too ; but it ain't done me no good so far. I come off second best i' the fight, and just feel as if I'd borrhored somebody else's legs to walk about on."

"John, I'm afraid you'll never mend," said the old lady, with a shake of her head.

"He's as bad as ever," said Mary.

"Oh, come now, I'm pulling round. I ain't so bad as all that. I'm precious hungry, anyhow, if there's aught to eat about."

"We are just going to have supper. I was locking up when you dropt from the clouds. It will be ready in a minute," said Mary, who thereupon bustled about, and in a very short time placed a substantial meal upon the table.

When Mr. Jarvey had satisfied the cravings of the inner man, he drew up to the fire, lighted his pipe, blew out a cloud, and remarked:—

"This is comfortable, old lady. I go into a variety o' places, but wherever I roam there's no place wot comes up to the little back parlour behind Mrs. Jarvey's fent shop."

"You didn't think so as a lad, John," said his mother.

“ Well, I didn’t. The old general’s religion wos too much for me. It wos a kind o’ religion as paid itself out in wengeance. He dealt out too much strap. So I bolted and set up for myself.”

“ And missed your schooling ? ”

“ And missed my schooling.”

“ And neglected the means of grace ? ”

“ Wot, going to chapel ? ”

“ Yes, John. I fear it is a long time since you were in a place of worship.”

“ I won’t deny that, old lady ; but I’m pulling round, I tell you, and to-morrow I mean to have a peep in half the churches and chapels in Manchester. Come now,” said Mr. Jarvey, who had an idea that he was about to wipe out an old score in a very satisfactory manner.

"It will be a novelty to see John sitting in chapel," said Mary, who had not much faith in her brother's intentions.

"Well, never you mind. I tell you I'm a-going to have a peep into half the churches and chapels i' the city to-morrow, and so I am. But it's getting late, and the place I'm stopping at will be shut up if I stay here much longer. I come down because I had a bit o' business to do—because I thought I'd have a look at you—and because I wanted to have a chat wi' you about summat."

"Got something on your mind, have you, John," said his mother.

"Well, I suppose so, old lady. You see, this is the way of it," said Mr. Jarvey, refilling his pipe and lighting it.

“ Better than two year ago a man died wot owed me a sum o’ money wi’ a goodish bit o’ interest. He wos a showman. His gal—a bonny lass she was too—wrote me straightforward, saying as how the old ‘un wos dead, and that the waggin would stay where it wos till I went over to see arter things. She wosn’t short o’ sense, she wosn’t, and seeing as how it wosn’t no good standing out again wot wos to be, she gave up the show and made no fuss about it. The gal—which her name it wos Meg—had a brother about nine or ten, I should say, and a babby brother a year old. Well, being a regler soft’un, I let ‘em take their clothes, and the pots and pans, and gave ‘em a couple o’ pound to start life wi’, and off they set for Manchester.”

“And you turned them out of the only place they had to live in! That was hard-hearted and cruel, John,” said the old lady.

“Well, I did. But wait a bit. I’m a-coming to it. There wos some animals i’ the waggin, and some birds, and a panyarma, and a horse and a pony, and when they wos all sold—’cept the lion’s purwider—the on’y animal wot the lion won’t dewour—which went along wi’ me, and died i’ the back yard—they fetched a bit more than the debt and the interest. Now I don’t set up for being any better than I should be, but I never stuck to anything yet that didn’t belong to me, and I want to turn up the few pound over and above wot wos mine when the waggin and things wos sold.”

“You have been a long time making up

your mind," said Mary.

"Wait a bit, I'm a-coming to it. You see, I kept thinking I'd do it, and never done it. But there wos another thing—a while ago I see a adver-tisement in the paper wot said that if Michael Merriman, his heirs, *and assigns* would send their ad-dress to such a place they'd hear o' summat to their adwantage. Well, I went to that place—it wos a lawyer's office—and, to cut it short, they said if I'd find out old Mick's children for 'em it would be summat to *my adwantage* too."

"So you have come over to try and find them," said the old lady.

"Wait a minute, I'm a-coming to it," said Mr. Jarvey, lighting his pipe afresh.

"You see, still I didn't do it, and while I

wos thinking about it, I begun that set-to wi' the fever I told you of. And they said I wos raving all the time about turning folks out o' their homes, and such like. And when I come out o' the set-to, wi' a good deal taken out o' me, it kind o' bothered me still, don't you see?"

"It was your conscience troubling you, John. The Lord be praised," said his mother.

"Eh?—Oh! ah! that wos it, wos it?"

"Yes, John, it was an awakening of conscience. The Lord has not forgotten you."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm here to find out those children. To give up eight pound odd, and send up the ad-dress to the lawyers i' London. And I shall set about it to-morrow."

"But do you know where to look for them?" asked his mother.



"It was your conscience troubling you, John."—See page 76.

“Don’t I tell you they set off for Manchester?”

“But Manchester is a large place, even supposing they live here, John.”

“If it wos ten times as big I’d find ‘em if they wos in it. Ever since I had that set-to wi’ the fever I’ve wanted to hand over that eight pound odd, and tell ‘em there’s summat to their adwantage when the ad-dress is found, and if it takes me six months, I’m a-going to find those children,” said Mr. Jarvey with an air of determination.

“I hope you will succeed, John, for your own sake as well as theirs, poor things.”

“You see if I didn’t try and find ‘em while the fit’s on me, and aught went wrong wi’ those children, it might seem to be my fault, and

there might be another 'wakening some o' these days, old lady."

"Certainly, John. Where are you thinking of looking for them?"

"I shall have a turn among the churches and chapels first. For why? Because when I asked the gal wot she wos a-going to do, she made answer—'I don't know yet, but God will take care of us.' She said she heard that often in the churches and chapels, so it's reasonable to think that she'd look in at one of those churches and chapels to-morrow, being Christmas Day. So I'm a-going to peep into first one and then another, on spec o' finding her. In course, I mightn't find her that way. Then I shall have a turn among the poor parts o' the town, and enquire o' the people I meet wi'."

“And you will succeed, John. The Lord has put it into your heart to do the right, and He will direct you.”

“I hope so, old lady. Now, I must be off. I’ll look you up at dinner-time to-morrow.”

“Very well, John. I shall expect you,” said his mother.

“Good night, John,” said Mary. “It’s a treat to find you coming out in a new character.”

“Just you wait a bit. You’ll find me a-coming out strong,” said Mr. Jarvey, as he went out into the night.





CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTMAS IN A GARRET.

JHE morning of Christmas Day saw Mr. Jarvey, true to his word, on a tour amongst the churches and chapels. The steady downpour of rain on the previous evening had left the streets in a condition somewhat unsuited for pedestrian purposes, but the sky was clear and the sun imparted a spring-like warmth to the air. The better to enjoy this unaccountable weather at Christmas, Mr. Jarvey smoked a pipe as he wandered through the city. On

approaching a sacred edifice, however, he deferentially deposited his pipe in his waistcoat pocket, and respectfully doffed his fur cap as he addressed the apparitor or care-taker, as the case might be.

As it was not Mr. Jarvey's wish to be shown to a seat, but rather to have a "look round," as he put it, the door-keepers were at a loss what to make of him, and were divided in opinion as to whether he was a detective in disguise, or a suspicious character who ought to be handed over to the care of the police. But as Mr. Jarvey did not venture beyond the doors that were politely held open for him by obliging persons to enable him to "look round," his freedom was not interfered with, and thus he wandered from building to building

at his own sweet will. He was much impressed with the music at some of the churches—at one of them especially, where the congregation, assisted by a full choir and a powerful organ, were singing with all their hearts the soul-stirring hymn, “Brightest and best of the sons of the morning”—and he arrived at the sensible conclusion that “churches wos not such bad places arter all.” But he “looked round” in vain for those for whom he sought. Had he responded to the earnest invitation of an apparitor to take a seat in a certain church that was not far removed from Little Back Queer Street, he would have had no difficulty in discovering Meg, and Charlie, and Toady perched up in the gallery. As it was, dinner-time came all too soon upon Mr. Jarvey, and he had to

discontinue his search for that morning.

Whilst Mr. Jarvey was "looking round," Dan Damper was struggling with a cookery book and the ingredients for a pudding. Dan was a sojourner in Little Back Queer Street, and his bachelor abode was a garret as near the sky as the architectural proportions of a three-storied dwelling would permit of. Dan's domicile was a model of its kind. It was divided into three sections by means of screens of painted woodwork, and was made to answer for three distinct and separate apartments, viz.: living-room, bed-chamber, and work-shop; and so methodical was he that not a shaving or a grain of sawdust was permitted to appear beyond one screen, nor was a glimpse of the bed to be obtained without peeping over the

other. Dan had great faith in whitewash as a sanitary agent, and the walls were never allowed to look dingy for want of lime and elbow grease. He had planed the floor until the boards were as smooth as marble, and as he did not spare the scrubbing brush, they were cleaner and sweeter than any carpet could have been. A home-made rug of clippings was stretched across the hearth, and such works of art as are presented at Christmas to the readers of the illustrated papers, framed and glazed by his own hand, adorned the walls. He had fixed a ventilator in the window, and several articles of furniture in the room were of his own manufacture. There Dan lived, and there in his spare hours he worked at odd jobs on his own account, or improved his mind by reading such

books as his shelves contained. Behold him, then, in his shirt sleeves on Christmas Day morning, struggling with a penny cookery book and the ingredients for a pudding.

"It don't seem right, somehow," said Dan, stirring the sticky compound in the basin with a fork. "Think I must have put too much water in it. And I haven't got any more flour. That's awkward, now. It isn't often I stick fast in the housekeeping line. I flatter myself I can do most things, from sewing on a button to making a potato pie."

From force of habit he whistled a stave or two of "Cheer, boys, cheer," ruffled his hair, and then took up the cookery book again.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, "it will take four or five hours to boil. I never thought of that.

Why, it wouldn't be ready till three o'clock. That won't do. Oh, bother ! I don't want to salute the happy morn any more to-day. I've had enough of it," he said, as there came a knock at the door.

" It's me," exclaimed a rather musical voice from the outside.

" Oh, it's me, is it ?" said Dan, throwing open the door.

The rather musical voice belonged to a shabbily-dressed, untidy girl, who was by no means bad looking, and whose large staring eyes gave her a very wide-awake appearance. The moment the door was opened she delivered herself in one unbroken sentence ; thus—

" A merry Christmas and a happy New Year mother's got the spassums will you give her

some of that stuff she had before what a beautiful morning lor ! is that a pudding how queer it looks but mother's got the spassums will you give her some of that stuff she had before let me make the pudding for you how neat and tidy we are on the top floor to be sure."

"Spasms first, pudding afterwards," said Dan, taking from a cupboard a tin canister containing a herbal preparation of a hot and spicy nature.

"Now, have you got your breath?"

"Yes and—"

"Well, that's a mercy," said Dan, breaking her off short at the beginning of another out burst. "Give your mother two teaspoonsful of this in some hot water. When she's easier, you can come up again if you like, and see what's to be done with this pudding."

“Thanks with pleasure as soon as mother’s—”

“All right. Don’t waste time,” said Dan, motioning the girl towards the door.

“Polly Pringle wouldn’t be half a bad sort of girl if she was a bit more tidy in her ways, and didn’t rattle on so every time she opens her mouth,” said Dan as he gave the pudding another stir with the fork. “I sometimes think Polly’s got it into her head that she’ll be Mrs. Damper some of these days. I should be sorry if she had, because she never will be. If I hadn’t seen Meg, I might perhaps have given Polly a few lessons in tidiness and grammar, and have seen how she shaped ; but it wouldn’t do, as things are ; she’d be certain to think I was sweet on her if I offered to teach her anything. There’s my vagabond come home.”

The vagabond was scratching and whining at the door.

"Oh, yes, you're in a mighty hurry to get in, aren't you? You weren't in such a hurry to come home last night. Been a Christmassing, I suppose, eh ?" said Dan, aloud, without opening the door.

The vagabond continued scratching and whining.

"If it wasn't Christmas Day I don't think I'd let you in," he said, opening the door an inch or two.

A ragged old dog, that had the appearance of having been made out of a door-mat that had seen long service, raised its eyes imploringly, and mutely appealed to the forbearance of its master.

“ You’re a prodigal if there ever was one, and like the rest of them, you’re glad to sneak in home when there’s nothing to be got by stopping out. Get into your box, and don’t let me hear a word till dinner time. Now ! ” and opening the door, Dan let the old dog in. With all its faults, it was a faithful animal, and Dan gave it a tender glance as it made straight for its box, and curled itself up.

“ How’s the spasms ? ” he enquired, as Polly Pringle made her re-appearance.

“ Better mother’s breathing easier I hope you made it big enough you couldn’t eat it in a week just like a man when you can afford to take a wife why don’t you lor ! it isn’t half stiff enough,” and she promptly took the pudding in hand.

"Well, it can't be helped. I got wrong in my calculations, somehow. It doesn't matter, though I wanted to send it somewhere, you see," said Dan, who was really disappointed at the breakdown in his culinary arrangements.

"You didn't make it for yourself somebody's highly favoured I'm sure but just like you Dan Damper give all you have away it needn't be wasted can be boiled to-day served up hot another day let me do it for you shall I you've got some mistletoe over the mantle shelf."

"Yes," said Dan, "take it away. I've seen enough of that pudding for one day. Make a good job of it any time between now and next Christmas, and I'll have a taste of it. You're

not having roast goose for dinner downstairs,
I suppose?"

"That we're not roast goose is for rich folks
its chair-knobs and pump-handles in Little
Back Queer Street come day go day—"

"Well, look here, Polly. One good turn
deserves another. You take my pudding in
hand, and I'll look after your dinner—"

"No Dan Damper never be it—"

"Now do listen a minute. You see I set
my heart on providing a certain family with a
Christmas dinner, but a certain family was too
independent to accept it. So I spent the money
in so many pounds of pork chops, onions,
potatoes, etc., and I am going to cook the lot,
and when they're ready you shall take your
mother a dish, and some to old Ned, the

cobbler, who scarcely gets any work now-a-days. I might just as well drink away my money like the rest of them, if I don't do a bit of good with it, especially on Christmas Day. Is it a bargain?"

"I suppose you must have your own way I'll go and tell mother I don't think old Ned's got any dinner at all but for you well you are a good man half the women would jump at you if you asked them but you like the dog better I'll take the pudding with me what time shall I come I can help you with the frying and hot plates mother's calling now I'll go."

"Come up about half-past twelve," said Dan, adding as soon as the girl had disappeared, "That's a relief, anyway. I'll have a pipe now."

Dan and his dog had seen twelve Christ-

mas Days in that garret. Considering that he earned good wages, attended night classes at the Mechanics' Institution, and was trying to raise himself to a respectable position, some people wondered that he should continue to reside in Little Back Queer Street. But Dan was not fond of changing about, and until such time as he could claim some good woman for his wife, he was content to occupy his old quarters with old Jack for his companion.

He stood looking at the fire, and smoking his pipe for a few minutes, then, catching his dog's eye, he called :—

“ Jack, you vagabond, come here ! ”

The dog needed no second invitation, but sprang to his master's feet at a bound.

“ Jack, old chap, I half thought you and I

would have gone out to our dinner to-day, but we've made a mess of it, old chap. Instead of sending Meg a goose or something and saying nothing about it, I mentioned it first, you see, and of course she refused it. If I'd have sent it in first, she couldn't have refused, and might very likely have asked you and I to help to eat it, old chap. That was blunder number one."

Jack wagged his tail, as though he rather approved of blunder number one.

"Then when Miss Independent wouldn't accept a present for Christmas, from a friend who might be her husband if she liked to say the word, I thought I'd send in a good-sized plum pudding, smoking hot, as a present for Toady, who isn't old enough to be independent. But through an oversight, the pudding can't be

ready in time. And that's blunder number two, old chap."

Jack wagged his tail to an extent that was suggestive of blunder number two being equally satisfactory.

"Seeing that our friends, the Merrimans won't let us help to make them happy and jolly, we'll try and make old Mrs. Pringle, and Polly, and poor old Ned happy and jolly, so far as a good allowance of pork chops, and onions, and potatoes go, and then we'll try and enjoy our own Christmas dinner, old chap. I suppose the idea of Christmas in a garret would make some of the upper crust faint. But we've seen a round dozen of Christmas days in this garret, old chap, and I don't think we've ever felt anything worse than hungry, and that's something

to be thankful for. Now we must begin our preparations.” As a prelude, Dan laid down his pipe, and whistled “Cheer, boys, cheer,” right through, whilst Jack gave chase to his own worn old tail in an ecstatic state of joy.

In that other garret, Meg, and Charlie, and Toady were just about to sit down to their Christmas dinner. Yes, ye gentlemen of England, who stay at home at ease—their Christmas dinner! The cloth was laid, and though it was old and darned, it possessed a merit that the generality of table cloths in Little Back Queer Street did not—it was spotlessly clean. In the centre was a smoking dish of potatoes, flanked on the one side by an apology for a cruet stand, on the other by a basin of bread sauce. Some pieces of bread, and three mugs of water,

completed the arrangements. It is possible to conceive of a worse meal than that, though it did lack the elements of such a feast as most people associate with the day that is said to bring good cheer.

Meg's heart (if it needed it) had been softened by the service she had participated in, and she could have dined off a crust with thankfulness. Not so Charlie, however, who cherished feelings of resentment, and grieved Meg by indulging in useless complaints and regrets.

"Meg," he said, "I don't think I'll ever forgive you for letting Mr. Jarvey turn us out of the old waggon when he asked you to dispute his paper if you liked. Just fancy the jolly time we had going about from place to place, seeing plenty of life, and always having plenty

to eat. Fancy the hatsful of coppers we took, and the pony, and the birds, and the beasts, and all of it. I can hardly like you when I come to think of it ; and I think of it worse than ever when it has to be chair-knobs and pump-handles for dinner on Christmas Day. Father would have turned the waggon inside out at the sight of those potatoes, and so would I if I was a man."

" Charlie, dear, don't talk like that on Christmas Day. You heard what the minister said : Our hearts should be full of gratitude, not evil thoughts, on the anniversary of the day on which the Saviour was born. You know very well I only did what was right, and that Mr. Jarvey only took what properly belonged to him," said Meg, gently, smoothing the boy's curly head.

“Oh, didn’t he? Just wait till I’m a man; he’ll have to fight if I meet him; yes, though he’s grown a mile high since then,”

“Well, never mind Mr. Jarvey now, Charlie, the potatoes will get cold. Let us get our dinner, and be thankful we have some to get.”

“Oh, I daresay,” replied the boy, taking his seat with a discontented countenance.

Meg filled the plates, and handed Charlie and Toady theirs. The latter at once attacked his food with his spoon, but Meg stopped him, and bowing her head, said—

“Toady.”

“Res.”

“For what we are——”

“Doing to sleeve——”

“The Lord make us——”

“Toory tanky, Amen.”

“Amen,” repeated Meg.

Charlie’s “Amen” nearly stuck in his throat, but he got it out, though it had not a hearty sound with it.

“Here’s t’wards us,” croaked the parrot, as Charlie raised his mug to his lips.

“Now, just hark at that, Meg. I was trying to be contented, and was just having a drink of water, when Polly calls out ‘Here’s t’wards us,’ as father used to say. I think it would have been a good job if Mr. Jarvey had taken Polly too, I do. ‘Here’s t’wards us,’ indeed!” said Charlie, shaking his fist at the bird.

Encouraged by a little notice being taken of its previous venture, Polly whistled a stave or two of “Charlie is my darling.”

"Oh, am I? Well, then, I wish you wouldn't taunt me when I'm trying to be contented, and am nearly choking myself with potatoes," said Charlie, getting off his seat and sticking half a potato in the bird's cage.

"Poor old bird! Poor Meg! Poor Charlie! Poor Toady! Where's the cat? Any more this time? A little farther back, please," croaked Polly, finally making a grab at Charlie's fingers.

As Charlie delighted in teasing the bird, he stood by the cage a few moments, poking his fingers between the bars, and returned to the table in a better humour.

"Meg," he said, when the meal was over, "I shall go out Christmassing this afternoon."

"Don't, Charlie. It's only another name for

begging. I would rather be without money, useful as it is, than ask people for it on whom I have no claim," said Meg.

"But everybody does it at Christmas time, and so shall I."

Self-willed and selfish, he had no thought for Meg and her struggles to procure their daily bread.

"I hope you won't, Charlie. I want you to grow up independent, and determined to earn your bread, not beg it," said Meg, as she began to clear away the things.

Charlie knew she was right, but all the same he took his cap and went out.

In the evening, Dan made his appearance, accompanied by Jack, to the intense delight of Toady, who could extract as much fun out of

pulling a dog's tail as most children of his age. Dan was specially "got up" for the occasion. He wore a light pair of trousers, a remarkable vest covered with a prolific growth of many-hued sprigs, such as was the fashion some years ago, a brown coat with stag-horn buttons and a liberal allowance of velvet collar, a scarf of royal blue satin, and as tall a hat as any hatter ever constructed for half-a-guinea, box included. In his hand he carried a substantial walking-stick with an ivory handle, and in his mouth a choice cigar, warranted real Havana, seven for a shilling, in case, with chromo portrait of Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen. Dan had good taste in many things, but in matters of fashion his good taste was not so apparent. To do him justice, however, it must be said

that he dressed to please himself, not with any idea of creating a sensation among his acquaintances. Moreover, he firmly believed that his Sunday suit was becoming, and in no way extravagant.

“ Well, and how are we? A merry Christmas, if it isn’t too late. How are you enjoying yourselves ?” said Dan, depositing his hat and stick upon the floor.

“ A merry Christmas to *you*,” said Meg. “ We have enjoyed ourselves pretty well in a quiet way. We went to church this morning—”

“ And had chair-knobs and pump-handles for dinner,” put in Charlie, whose Christmassing had been a dismal failure, and had damped his spirits rather than otherwise.

“ Charlie !” said Meg imploringly.

“ Well, chair-knobs and pump-handles are not so bad when they’re well cooked. I’ve had many a meal of them. But I’ll tell you what I never tasted yet.”

“ What ? ” enquired Charlie.

“ Bread and cheese and kisses.”

“ Why, that’s the same thing,” said Charlie.

“ Well, it is with a difference. I never tasted that meal yet.”

“ How’s that ? ” asked Charlie..

“ Why, you see, my mother died before I was half as old as Toady here, so that I don’t remember her. My father—well, least said about him the better. He died when his time came, and I was thrown on the world to do the best I could for myself. I don’t think I have a relation on earth. But I don’t know that I’ve

got on any the worse for that, except that I've never had any kisses thrown in with my bread and cheese. But I hope to have my share of them yet. What do you think, Toady?" said Dan, throwing the child up and catching him.

" Res," said Toady, stoutly.

" Come, I'm glad one member of the family thinks there's good things in store for me," said Dan, with a glance at Meg's glowing cheeks.

" What makes your pockets bulge out so ?" enquired Charlie the curious.

" Why, some things found their way in there. Better take them out, hadn't I ? They spoil the fit of my coat." On which Dan emptied his side pockets of their contents, which turned out to be apples and oranges.

" And I shall be having a pain on my chest

if I don't get rid of this," he said, producing a parcel of almonds and raisins from his breast pocket.

Then, before he could sit down comfortably, he had to empty his trousers' pockets of something short of a pound of Barcelona nuts.

" You shouldn't, Dan," said Meg, who was really pleased on the children's account.

" Now we'll eat the fruit, and play a game for the nuts," said Dan, producing a pack of snap cards.

So Meg, and Dan, and Charlie sat down to the table to enjoy a friendly game at cards, whilst Toady, with a goodly supply of eatables, sat on the floor and divided his attention between his fruit and the dog.

" Hallo !" said Dan, turning round in the

middle of the game, “what do you mean by growling on Christmas Day, you vagabond? He can’t pull your tail out, can he? Just you be good tempered, and let him pull it as much as he likes. It’s not such a grand tail that you need be so precious particular about it?”

The good old dog at once wagged his tail, licked Toady’s hands and face, and submitted to being dragged all over the floor for the rest of the evening.

They had a merry time of it, despite the fact that they spent their Christmas in a garret, and when Dan went home he carried away with him a new experience. He had had his first kiss.



CHAPTER V.

CHARLIE ENCOUNTERS THE REMORSELESS ENEMY.

FARLY in the new year Dan had a conversation with Meg which, though it did not result in a formal engagement, was sufficiently satisfactory to his mind. Meg had frankly admitted that she could entrust her happiness to Dan's care, but she had said that she could not make up her mind to encumber him with Charlie and Toady. To that objection Dan had replied that he was better fitted to look after them than she was, and that she might dismiss the objection without a thought.

But that Meg said she could not do, and must have time to think about it. Dan said that was only reasonable; and looking upon the matter as practically settled, he considered himself a very lucky fellow, and whistled "Cheer, boys, cheer," more frequently than ever.

Such being the state of affairs, it was natural then that Dan should begin to evince a fatherly interest in Charlie, who might scarcely be said to be on the high road to either fame or fortune. Charlie having failed to procure for himself any permanent employment of a respectable character, Dan took the matter in hand, and as he never allowed the grass to grow under his feet, many days had not passed before he found the boy a situation in a shipping house,

where he was expected to make himself generally useful, in consideration of the payment of five shillings weekly.

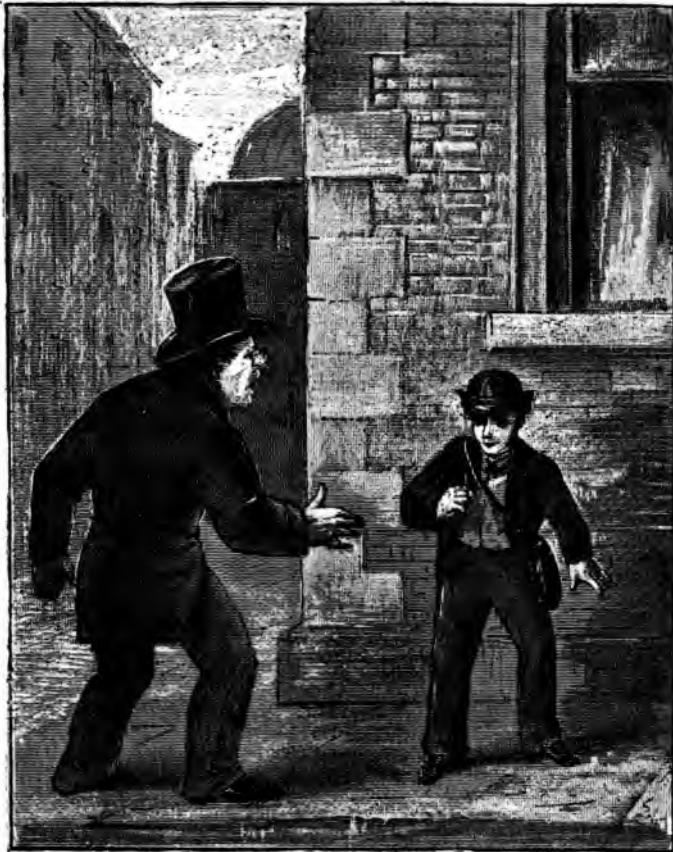
“ Now, look here, Charlie,” said Dan, on the evening preceding the day on which the boy entered upon his duties, “ to-morrow you make what is called a start in life. I’ve held myself responsible for your good behaviour and honesty, and all you’re expected to do is to be sharp, industrious, and honest. You may be anything almost if you make up your mind to stick to it, and get on. There’s a gentleman in that warehouse who went to sweep out the place and run errands for three shillings a week five-and-twenty years ago, and now he’s getting ten pound a week, and lives in a house of his own in the country. Go thou and do likewise.”

Meg was very much pleased. Five shillings a week would be an important addition to her income, and, moreover, Charlie would have an opportunity of making for himself a respectable position.

It was a fortnight after Christmas when Charlie went to his work for the first time, and in the meantime Mr. Jarvey's mission had been a failure. The particular business of his own which had brought him down from London had long since been transacted, and but for his determination to discover the whereabouts of Meg, there would have been no necessity for his remaining in Cottonopolis. But Mr. Jarvey had firmly stated his intention of "coming out strong," and to his mind it would have been an exhibition of weakness to

have abandoned his search whilst there was a shadow of a chance of success. So far he had certainly been baffled in the attempt. In addition to Christmas Day, he had spent two Sundays amongst the churches and chapels, and on each and every week-day he had made enquiries in the poor parts of the city; but as the poor neighbourhoods were even more numerous than were the places of worship, he had by no means exhausted them at the end of a fortnight, and was still "looking round" in the hope that success would at length crown his labours.

On the day on which Charlie entered upon his situation, Mr. Jarvey was "looking round" in the neighbourhood of the General Post-office. Not that he had any idea of finding Meg



'Charlie turned round and beheld.'—See page 123.



housed in that locality, but because it had occurred to him that possibly some of the boys whom he had seen crowding into the Post-office with their letter bags might be able to afford him some information which could be turned to good account. He had interrogated a considerable number of the lads to no purpose, when he saw Charlie bound down the steps, and run down a side street, with his letter bag strapped across his shoulders.

“Hi!” shouted Mr. Jarvey, running after him as quickly as his strength, which had been much reduced by that “set-to wi’ the fever,” would permit of.

“Hi! stop him!” he shouted again, in full pursuit, as Charlie rounded a corner.

Suddenly being aware that somebody was

giving him chase, Charlie turned round, and to his great astonishment beheld the attenuated form of the remorseless enemy.

“ Oh, it’s you that’s running after a boy and shouting ‘Hi! stop him,’ as though he was a thief, is it, Mr. Jarvey? I can’t see what you want people to stop me for when I’m in a hurry with the post bag. Come, now, what do you mean by it, Mr. Jarvey?” said Charlie, resentfully.

“ This is immense!” exclaimed Mr. Jarvey, as soon as he had got his breath. “ Why, Charlie, my boy, I’ve been looking for you more’n a couple o’ weeks.”

“ Oh, have you? Perhaps you’ve got another paper what can’t be disputed, and have come to turn us out of house and home again.

I shouldn't be surprised. But you've got to find out where we live, that's all, Mr. Jarvey," piped the boy.

"Now, don't you put yourself about, my lad. I want to act square and fair by you. I've got a matter o' eight pound odd to hand over to your sister, and when the ad-dress is found there'll be summat to your adwantage. Just you take me to where you live, and see if it isn't all right. How are you getting on?"

"We're not getting on at all. At least we have'nt been; but I've got a situation now, and I mean to stick to it, and perhaps in a while I may have ten pound a week and a house in the country."

"Well, I'm glad to hear o' that. But just

you take me to where you live, and see if it isn't all right."

"If I thought you meant to do us good, honour bright, and didn't mean to be hard with us again——"

"That's it—honour bright."

"Well, then, I'll tell you what. I'll show you where the warehouse is I work at, and if you'll be outside at six o'clock when I leave off, why, I'll take you home. But we've got a friend to stand by us now, so if you try to be hard with us again, you'll find some one who will stand by us and not see us turned out of house and home. So now I tell you, Mr. Jarvey."

"That's fair. I'll meet you at leaving off time, and you'll see it'll be all right," said Mr.

Jarvey, taking stock of the warehouse, as Charlie entered it with his letter bag.

As the place of business at which Charlie was engaged was within five minutes' walk of Little Back Queer Street, Mr. Jarvey had not long to wait after the hour of six had struck before he had the satisfaction of handing over to Meg the money that had troubled him so long.

"There, I've got rid of it at last, and I hope my mind'll be the easier for it. *Now* have I been hard with you?" he demanded triumphantly, as he turned to Charlie.

"Oh, well, if it was ours, you'd no right to keep it, you know——" began Charlie. But Meg stopped him with—

"Never mind that, Charlie. Mr. Jarvey has

restored it to us, and we are very much obliged to him. The money will be useful."

"Well, I hope so," said Mr. Jarvey. "Now there's another thing." And having explained the matter referred to in the advertisement he had seen in the newspaper, he said, "The ad-dress must be sent up right away, and then you'll hear o' summat to your adwantage. Didn't I tell you it would be all right?"

"Yes, you did, and I hope it will be, I'm sure; but I can't forget you turned us out of the old waggon that time, Mr. Jarvey. It isn't likely I can think very well of you," said Charlie, nursing his grudge against the remorseless enemy.

Meg was at a loss to understand what good fortune there could possibly be in store for them.

“It’s very strange,” she said. “I don’t know of any one who can have left us any money or property.”

“Give your relations and belongings a turn-over in your mind,” suggested Mr. Jarvey.

“We have no relations that I know of.”

“Hadn’t you a brother wot ran away to sea, and might have dropt on his legs i’ foreign parts, an’ married a emperor’s daughter, or summat, o’ that sort, like you read on i’ the papers, eh?”

“No,” said Meg, with a smile.

“There must be somebody—uncle, aunt, cousin, or so on,” persisted Mr. Jarvey.

“I can’t think of anybody belonging to us—except a brother of father’s in Australia. Father used to mention him sometimes when I

was a child, but I know he gave him up for dead, years ago."

"That's him, you may be sure. Wery likely he wos careless about his on'y brother thousands o' miles away, an' then when he wos took bad—p'raps had a set-to wi' the fever an' it brought on a 'wakening—he wanted to do wot wos right, an' left him all his money in a last will an' testament. That's it, an' the ad-dress must go up to-night—this very night," said Mr. Jarvey, delighted at having settled the matter to his own satisfaction.

"I can scarcely think we are the persons being advertised for," said Meg, "but there can be no harm in sending our address to the place you name. We shall soon know whether there is something to be heard to our advantage, or not."

"In course you will. I always said as you wos not short o' sense. You talk like a book wi' picters in, Miss." So the address was sent up to London that evening, the letter being in Meg's handwriting, the matter the joint production of Meg and Mr. Jarvey. The latter undertook to post it, and stated his intention of remaining in Manchester until the reply came. It came to hand as soon as the return post could bring it, and the information it contained was to the effect that Miss Merriman might shortly expect a visit from a representative of a local firm of solicitors acting as agents for the firm in London.

The representative waited upon Meg the same day. He was a stylish-looking young man, who was evidently on the best of terms

with himself, and he gave his name as Mr. Romer. By a slight but not unnatural mistake, Mr. Jarvey, who was present at the interview, addressed the dashing young man as "Mr. Romeo," and as he made no objection to a name so distinguished in romance, "Mr. Romeo" he was called ever afterwards by all interested in the case, save Meg, who would not have thought of taking such a liberty.

What "Mr. Romeo" had to say at this first interview was disappointingly little. He had received instructions to wait upon Miss Merriman, and so forth. A person had died in Australia (Mr. Jarvey chuckled here and rubbed his hands), and had left a will in which one Michael Merriman, of such a place, and so forth, his heirs, administrators, and assigns were

interested. He was not in a position to give particulars, but if Michael Merriman the aforesaid, his heirs, administrators, and assigns could be produced, and their identity proved, he believed he was justified in observing that he or they would hear of something very considerably to his or their advantage. Michael Merriman was dead, he believed. In that case the heirs, administrators, and assigns were wanted. Evidence would, of course, have to be forthcoming as to the fact of Michael Merriman being deceased, and certificates of birth of the next of kin, and so forth. And that was all "Mr. Romeo" had to say, except that until these documents were procured no steps could be taken to establish a claim, and that the case could scarcely be said to have been advanced a stage.

“Mr. Romeo” was a very affable young man, and having discharged the legal part of his visit, he enquired the age of Toady, wished Meg success, and paid her the compliment of remarking that she was handsome enough to deserve it.

“Those stiffs must be got,” said Mr. Jarvey. “Suppose I wos to get ‘em, wot then?”

“You would render this young lady a service, and would be paid for your trouble,” replied “Mr. Romeo.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Mr. Jarvey.

As the Merrimans had each been born in a different county, and as their parents had died in others, Mr. Jarvey saw that he had his work cut out for him; but having made up his mind

to "come out strong," he undertook to collect the necessary documentary evidence.

"As a friend o' the family, you know."

"Quite so," said "Mr. Romeo." "Perhaps you had better look in at our office before you set out on your travels."

"There's no time like the present, young man. I'll go wi' you now," said Mr. Jarvey.

So after "Mr. Romeo" had politely taken his leave of Meg, the two went down the stairs together.





CHAPTER VI.

DAN SPEAKS HIS MIND, AND CHANGES HIS TUNE.

MEGL scarcely knew what to think of this new aspect of affairs. At times she was inclined to think there must be some mistake, and that the prospective good fortune would never be hers. Then again, when she recalled the expression she had made use of on that last night in the old waggon—"God will take care of us"—it seemed to her that those had not been idle words, and that Providence was about to open a way for her, which would enable her to lead a life such as she had aspired to, in the midst of very unfavourable surround-

ings, in years gone by. But she would not build herself up too much on the probability of these expectations being realized. Moreover, the matter should be kept a secret until something more definite was known. Perhaps, unwisely, she decided not to take Dan into her confidence. But her motives were good.

“Whatever position I may be raised to, I will be true to him,” she said to herself. “But he shall know nothing of this while there is any doubt about it. If I told him now, and it all turned out a mistake, he would be more disappointed than I should be. No, I will tell Dan nothing at present, and I will caution Charlie not to talk about it to any one.”

Thus it happened that Dan, who was very busy about this time, dropt in on one or two

nights a week for several weeks in total ignorance of the machinery that had been set in motion to clear away the difficulties with which the case was beset. A guilty feeling stole over Meg at times when Dan was present, but, once resolved, she could be very firm, and as her conscience acquitted her of wrong intentions, she continued to keep her secret.

Mr. Jarvey, having received his instructions, had set out upon his travels, and had reported, through the post, some slight success ; but as he had not been heard of for several days, it was conjectured that he had found his way to a town or city in which the ecclesiastical edifices were rather too many for him. Charlie, who had taken kindly to the shipping trade, had already formed a high opinion of his own

abilities, and was looking forward to an advance of wages as a preliminary step towards the coveted ten pounds a week and a house in the country. As for “Mr. Romeo,” had that young man had any idea of the heartburnings that would result from his visits to No. 2 Court, Little Back Queer Street, he would probably have transferred the business that took him there to an infirm old clerk, or some raw youth whose heart was less susceptible to the charms of female beauty. As it was, he paid Meg more visits than the exigencies of business justified. But “Mr. Romeo” was a wide-awake as well as a stylish young man ; and, as a budding attorney, it behoved him to have his wits about him, or, as he himself expressed it—to be “all there when wanted.” Hence, business having

thrown in his way a pretty girl and a probable heiress, he decided to take advantage of the situation, and improve her acquaintance. Upon the slightest pretext he would call upon Meg, and as she generally received him with a smile, "Mr. Romeo" flattered himself that his visits were appreciated by her. In a while he even indulged in a little mild flirtation, but in that he met with little or no assistance from Meg, and he soon saw that neither poverty nor the air of Little Back Queer Street had robbed the girl of self-respect or right feeling. Still, Meg liked the young man, and he knew it. He was very chatty and affable; he was well read and could converse freely on any subject, besides always having a budget of news at hand, and as there really was nothing objectionable about him, Meg

did not discourage his visits, or question the propriety of his calling upon her, especially as “Mr. Romeo” had invariably something to say about business when he looked in.

It happened about this time that the firm of builders for whom Dan worked had taken the contract for an extensive job at a distant town, and had decided to send Dan there as foreman of the joiners engaged at the works. Dan had been told of this in the course of the morning, and as he was expected to set out on the following day he thought he would let Meg know of the appointment, which would mean an increase of wages, at dinner-time.

But when Dan ran up the stairs, and opened the door without knocking as usual, he found Meg engaged with a well-dressed, good-looking

young man, who appeared to be explaining the nature of some papers he held in his hand. As Dan rather prided himself on his good manners, he took a hasty glance at the stranger, and saying, "Beg pardon; will look in again," he ran down stairs as quickly as he had gone up.

Encountering Charlie in the street, on his way to his dinner, Dan stopped him with—

"I've just been up to see Meg, Charlie, but there's a young man with her. Who is he?"

"A young man?" repeated Charlie.

"Yes; a regular swell."

"Perhaps it's Mr. Romeo. It can't be anybody else that I know of."

"Oh! he's Mr. Romeo, is he? And who's he when he's at home?"

Remembering Meg's caution, Charlie knew

not what answer to give to this question, so he replied—

“He’s a friend of ours, and I like him very much. He gave me sixpence the other day.”

“Well, that’s all right. But who is he, and what’s his business with Meg? And how is it I have never heard of this friend of the family before? I suppose you can tell me that, Charlie?” said Dan, who hated mysteries.

“I can’t—that is, I mustn’t tell you anything. You had better ask Meg. Let me go, Dan, I shall be late for my dinner.”

But Dan had hold of Charlie’s shoulder, and he held him at arm’s length for a few moments whilst he looked into the boy’s confused face.

“Look here, Charlie,” he said, “I don’t want to press you to tell anything you have been

told not to. If Meg's told you not to say anything to me about this young man, I'll let you go. Has she?"

"Yes, she has, then. She said I wasn't to talk about it to you or anybody. So don't blame me, and look at me in that way, when I can't help myself."

"I don't blame you. Go to your dinner. You needn't mention this to Meg, Charlie—you hear?"

"I'm not going to do," said Charlie, glad to be released.

Dan was puzzled, and scarcely whistled a note over his work during the remainder of the day. He was not aware that he had any right to object to Meg having a friend who called upon her occasionally, but he was so straight-

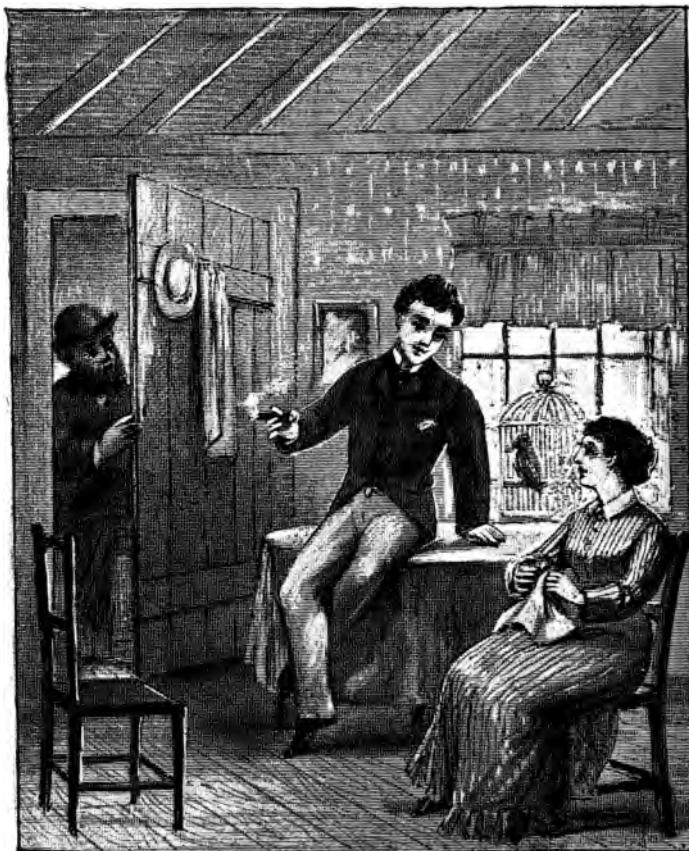
forward and above board himself that Charlie's hesitancy, and the fact that the boy had been told by Meg not to say anything to him about this friend, made him very uncomfortable.

“Who is Mr. Romeo, and what is his business with Meg? If he’s a friend—true, honest, and the rest of it—then why this mystery? I must know something more about this before I go to sleep to-night,” said Dan to himself. Over and over again he repeated this, and he tried in vain to concentrate his thoughts on his work, as he sawed, and planed, and hammered at the bench.

Dan was impulsive and quick tempered, but there was nothing mean about him. Before evening came he felt vexed with himself for having spoken to Charlie about the matter.

“Why couldn’t I have waited till night, and have asked Meg right out who her friend is, and all about him? But it seemed natural that I should speak to Charlie, as he happened to be the first person I saw when I ran down the stairs. And I should have thought no more about it but for his looking so confused, and declining to give any information. But I’ll go to the fountain head to-night. That’s always the quickest and easiest way of setting things right when they seem to go wrong.”

Thus Dan communed with himself, and when his day’s work was done, and he had had his tea and changed his things (it being a class night), he went to see Meg. He had not much time to spare, as that would be the last opportunity he would probably have of attending his



"Oh!"—See page 145

but, instead of coming forward to claim his reward, he had mysteriously disappeared, to Meg's disappointment, and Mrs. Jarvey's great concern.

Meg had to undertake several journeys to London, and on each occasion "Mr. Romeo" was deputed by the firm to accompany her. In fact, the whole of the legal machinery was set fairly in motion, but the law is proverbial for its delays, and it need not surprise anybody very much that the year was six months old ere Meg dare congratulate herself on her good fortune.

During this period Meg was overwhelmed with the polite attentions of "Mr. Romeo," and was further embarrassed by that young gentleman finally making her an offer of his hand and his heart.

"I know you think it's your money I am after ; but upon my honour it is not. I adore the ground you walk upon, Miss Merriman, and if you had not a penny nor a pair of boots to your feet, I would marry you, and take the consequences at home. Just try me, and see if I can't be disinterested," exclaimed the young man, when he saw how hopeless his suit was.

"I should not think of doubting that for a moment. Besides, I really like you very much, and shall always be glad to have you for a friend," said Meg.

"Well, if I can't be anything better, I must be content with that," said "Mr. Romeo ; "but I should like to know who the favoured party is to whom you have given your heart."

"So you shall some day, but not at present.

Now I want to ask a favour of you, Mr. Romer."

"As many as you like ; the more the better. In fact, you can't ask too many favours while I am in my present state of mind."

"Well, you know, according to the will, I shall have to build a house, and I should like a certain person to build it for me without his knowing who it is for. And I should like to set a certain person up in business without his knowing from whom the money comes. The person's name is Dan Damper, and he lives in a garret a little lower down the street. He was very kind to us when we were poor and friendless, and I want to repay his kindness without his being aware of it just now. But he is very independent, and would not accept a

gift, so you must find out for me how much would be required to set a joiner up in a small way of business as a master builder, and the money must be offered him as a loan. Then, as his first job, he will build a house according to the will, and it must be ready to go into all complete on Christmas Eve. Now, if you will manage this for me, and keep my secret, I shall think you a friend indeed."

"I shall only be too delighted, Miss Merri-man. But where are you going to reside whilst your house is being built?"

"Here."

"Impossible! You must remove to some respectable quarters. I shall be very glad to hunt for apartments for you."

"Thanks, I intend to remain here until the

new house is ready, and I do not wish any one to know that any change has taken place in my circumstances — either Dan Damper, or any one else."

"Well, you do me surprise me ; but any wish of yours is sacred, Miss Merriman, and you shall see how disinterested I can be. I will set to work at once, and you shall hear from me as soon as possible. But to avert suspicion, the matter had better be arranged through our office, you know."

"Very well," said Meg, "so long as it is arranged."

Dan had but that week returned from the job he had been engaged upon in a distant town. During his absence he had had many a struggle with himself as to whether he should eat humble

pie, and write to Meg, but it had occurred to him that a series of letters passing between them might widen the breach instead of lessening it, and so he had decided to leave matters as they stood until he could see her again. Since his return he had on several evenings set out to call upon Meg, but on each occasion it had unfortunately happened that he had encountered "Mr. Romeo" either on his way to or from the familiar garret, and Dan had retraced his steps in disgust. To make matters worse, Polly Pringle had lost no time in favouring Dan with the news of the neighbourhood, and had made a special feature of such gossip as was in circulation consequent upon "Mr. Romeo's" visits to No. 2 Court. This state of things made Dan feel very sore at

heart, and he scarcely knew how to act for the best. See Meg he must, but what the result would be he hardly dared to think.

Dan was turning this over in his mind one evening, as he sat by the fire smoking his after-tea pipe, when he heard footsteps on the stairs, followed by a knock at his door.

“Quiet, Jack! Come in!” he shouted.

The door was opened, and “Mr. Romeo” walked in.

“Mr. Daniel Damper, I believe? Hallo! I didn’t know you were Mr. Daniel Damper. I’ve seen you before.”

“My name’s Dan, not Daniel, if you want me,” said Dan, considerably astonished on recognising his visitor.

“My mistake, perhaps; but I feel sure

the party said Mr. Daniel Damper," said the young man, glancing at a slip of paper in his hand.

"The party can't know me very well, then, that's all."

"Wasn't it on the stairs leading to Miss Merriman's room that I saw you? Of course it was, now I come to think of it. You see I had not the pleasure of your acquaintance then, or I should not have passed you without speaking. Perhaps you know Miss Merriman?"

"Slightly," said Dan, who wondered to what he was indebted for such a visit.

"Isn't she a splendid girl? So gentle and good, and yet so firm of purpose, you know. I never was so happy in knowing any one as I am in knowing Miss Merriman."

“Have you come here to talk about Miss Merriman?” enquired Dan, doggedly.

“Oh, dear no; but as you know her, I thought you might be glad to hear how highly I think of her. I call upon her frequently, you know, and the more I see of her the more I like her. I am a great friend of hers, you know——”

“Once more, have you come here to talk about that young lady?” demanded Dan, whose blood was fast bubbling up to boiling point.

“No. But when I begin talking about Miss Merriman I can hardly pull up. I have come on a matter of business. I have called here once or twice in the daytime, but you were out. May I smoke? Thanks,” and lighting a cigar he handed Dan his case.

“ I prefer my pipe,” said Dan, who had hard work to be civil to the young man.

“ Oh ! before we come to business, did you know a Mr. Jarvey ?”

“ I think I’ve heard of him ?” said Dan, who saw it was hopeless trying to hurry the young man.

“ He was quite a character, you know. I made his acquaintance at Miss Merriman’s. Our people gave him some work, which he really did very well ; but instead of turning up for his pay he disappeared, and we lost all trace of him. Well, to-day we heard he is dead. He took a fever, it seems ; was taken to the hospital, and died. Dreadfully shocking, isn’t it. Miss Merriman is quite grieved about it, and the old lady is awfully upset.”

“ What old lady ?”

“ Mrs. Jarvey, you know.”

“ Never heard of her. But I’m sorry for her if she’s lost her son.”

“ Certainly. But to come to business. You are a joiner, aren’t you ? A journeyman joiner ?”

“ Yes.”

“ How would you like to be set up in business on your own account, as joiner and builder, and that sort of thing ?”

Dan was fairly puzzled what to make of the young man.

“ You haven’t come here to chaff me, I hope,” he said, looking “ Mr. Romeo ” full in the face.

“ No, ’pon my honour.”

“ Then state your business in as few words as

possible. I shall soon know what reply to make."

"Well, a client of ours——"

"Stop! who am I to understand by 'ours'?"

"Our firm, you know—Romer, Lycett, and Romer."

"Then you are one of the firm, I suppose?"

"Not exactly one of the firm. I am the son of the head of the firm, and I shall be taken in in time."

"All right. Go on."

"A client of ours has empowered us to make you an offer. In a word, this client of ours—rather a queer client, by the way—is willing, first, to advance a sum of money, at a moderate rate of interest, to enable you to set up in business on your own account; and, second,

offers you as your first job a house to build. My errand at present is simply to acquaint you with our client's offer. If you think of entering it, as I suppose you will, you must call at our office, and ask for Mr. Deadgo, our managing clerk, who will furnish you with the necessary particulars. And that's all I have come for."

"This is not a joke, is it?" asked Dan, when he had stared hard at "Mr. Romeo" for a few seconds.

"No, I have been speaking sober truth."

"Then all I can say is, that it's a staggerer! I have not a relation on earth, that I know of, and certainly no friends equal to such a proposal as that. Will the name of the party be made known to me?"

“ I think not. But my instructions don’t go as far as that. Of course you can ask Mr. Deadgo, but I wouldn’t allow mere curiosity to stand in my way, if I were you. However, you will call and see Mr. Deadgo ?”

“ Yes, I’ll call, and see what comes of it, but I feel in a terrible fog. You have nothing more to say about it ?”

“ Not a word, only I hope it will be all right, and do you good. I have taken quite a fancy to you.”

As Dan could not reciprocate this feeling, he only remarked :—

“ I will call at your place to-morrow. But I don’t see my way very well to-night.”

Dan was greatly mystified, but he saw no reason why he should stand in his own light ;

and it may be recorded as a fact, that within a very short time, without having the slightest suspicion as to who was his benefactor, he had commenced operations, and had seen the foundations laid of Meg's future home.





CHAPTER VIII.

“THE HALLS OF DAZZLING LIGHT.”

P to Christmas Dan saw very little of Meg. He called occasionally, but as it generally happened that Meg was either out, or was just on the point of going out, the satisfaction Dan derived from these visits was very slight. He had told her of the unexpected piece of good fortune that had come to him, and with the brightest of smiles, and the faintest of blushes, she had said how glad she was, and that he had her best wishes. Dan had also had something to say about a fine new house he was building on a pretty spot on the Eccles Old

Road, a house which, in Dan's opinion, ought only to be referred to as "The Halls of Dazzling Light," for, said he—

"There won't be a dull room in it. It will be the brightest and most cheerful house imaginable, and though I say it as oughtn't, there will be no better built house anywhere, though it *has* to be ready all complete to go into on Christmas Eve."

But concerning the one matter about which he longed to have some talk with Meg, nothing was said.

The mystery connected with "Mr. Romeo's" visits alone acted as a barrier to Dan's happiness ; but Meg volunteered no explanation, and Dan, though very sore at heart on that account, was too independent to seek one. Thus Dan

lived on in a state of uncertainty, and told himself at times that Meg was changed, and would never be his; whilst Meg, though she considered her plans well laid, fancied that good fortune was spoiling him, and that when the time came she might not find it so easy to satisfy him that she had acted for the best in keeping him in the dark as to the real state of things. In the meantime, Dan had more work in hand than he could comfortably attend to, and had little time for wool-gathering, or brooding over matters that were not connected with business. Meg, too, found the days none too long, for what with preparations of one kind and another, necessitated by change of circumstances, her hands and mind were pretty well continually occupied.

During the year Meg had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Jarvey, and had gladly accepted the friendship which the good old lady had extended to her. Meg had spent a good deal of her time in the little parlour behind Mrs. Jarvey's fent shop, and, assisted by Mary Jarvey, had passed many busy hours there with her needle. On receipt of the news of the death of Mr. Jarvey, Meg had been very much touched (even Charlie had been sorry that the remorseless enemy had come to such an untimely end), and as the old lady had made a great trouble of her loss, Meg had felt it her duty to do all she could to comfort her, and thus her visits to Islington had steadily increasd right up to Christmas.

Christmas eve, that year, was one of the old

fashioned sort. It had been piercingly cold for days past, and had increased in intensity until the 24th, when the wind that bleached the streets and found its way into the obscurest nooks and corners of the city, blew with an icy breath that was suggestive of the Polar seas, and recalled the ghastly details of many an Arctic expedition. Had the wind come in one uninterrupted sweep fresh from a merry frisk among a thousand mighty floats, resplendent with the tints of the Aurora Borealis, it could scarcely have been more intensely, nippingly, bitingly cold. Of course there were those—people who affected fur-lined coats, sealskin vests, ringwood gloves, and double-soled boots with socks in—who discounted the severity of the weather by remarking that it was

“Glorious!” — “Delightful!” — “So seasonable!” — “Good for trade!” — “Prime for skating!” and so on. The tradesmen and the market people appreciated it, and were in an ecstatic state of joy, despite any personal discomfort they experienced, for the colder the air became, the more prodigal in their liberality became their customers, who seemed to be seized with an unconquerable desire to distribute broadcast among their friends and acquaintances turkeys, geese, hares, pheasants, beef, mutton, hams, oysters, and all manner of things edible which are popularly supposed to be more seasonable at Christmas than at any other part of the year. The cabmen and 'busmen did not mind it much, because it led to numerous invitations, on the part of jovial fares, to slip down

mysterious-looking passages, from whence they re-appeared with glowing countenances, and lips whose moistness required an application of the back of a hand or a coat cuff. In fact, by those who could make any capital out of it, or those who, for the sake of appearances, boastfully professed to enjoy it, the weather was pronounced to be all that could be desired, and was greeted accordingly. *How* cold it was, perhaps only the very poor and the utterly destitute really had any conception.

There was much suffering in Little Back Queer Street. Work was scarce, provisions were dear, and coal was a luxury almost beyond the reach of the dwellers in the more poverty-stricken districts. Possibly, had careful enquiries been instituted into the nature of some

of the distressing cases that were to be met with in Little Back Queer Street, and similar thoroughfares, it would have been found that improvident habits, or a too strong love of drink, was the cause of the wretchedness and misery of half the inhabitants. But the fact remained, and it became painfully apparent to Dan Damper that, setting aside altogether thoughts of Christmas fare, there were those round about him who were at the point of starvation for lack of the very necessaries of life.

"I've no patience with some of them," said Dan, when he was turning this over in his mind in the course of the morning, "because they deserve to be hard up and suffer. But lor ! one can't sit in judgment on folks weather

like this. Something will have to be done for some of them before I can comfortably turn in to-night."

Meg had also thought of this. She was not likely to forget the days of chair-knobs and pump-handles, and, recalling the last Christmas they had spent in the garret they were about to forsake that day, she made up her mind that whilst she quietly disappeared from amongst them, her poor neighbours should be remembered after a seasonable and acceptable fashion.

Meg had looked forward to that Christmas Eve, as a day that would bring her much happiness and contentment. But there seemed to be so much to be done—so much that required to be stealthily done, too—that, as the time drew near, she was seized with all sorts of nervous

fears lest the day should end badly after all. But she had a good deal of faith in the acumen of "Mr. Romeo," and when that young man called, by appointment, at an early hour, he received very particular instructions as to the carrying out of a carefully prepared programme, and retired to execute them, supremely happy at the thought that he was Miss Merriman's most valued and trusted friend.

Had the house that Dan had built been the famous "House that Jack built," it could scarcely have been more talked about or have roused up more curiosity in Little Back Queer Street, than was the case with the structure which had been reared on the Eccles Old Road. Dan was not the one to talk too much about his affairs, but it had got abroad, somehow or

other, that he had been commissioned to build a house after a particular design, at a certain cost, and which was to be ready on Christmas Eve for the occupation of some mysterious personage whose name was kept a profound secret. That had been quite sufficient for the dwellers in Little Back Queer Street, who had at once evinced a lively interest in the progress of the work, and had set apart sundry Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons for the purpose of inspecting the "Halls of Dazzling Light," as they neared completion, and resembled less three stories of wash-houses in an unfinished state.

As a matter of fact, it was a well-built house of goodly proportions, that stood back from the road a little way, and was enclosed in grounds

sufficiently extensive to allow of gardening operations on a fair scale. Though the work had necessarily been hurried, no expense had been spared to ensure its being well done, and certain apartments that were required for immediate use had been rendered as dry as snuff by means of roaring fires, and had been beautified and finished ready for occupation. -

Towards noon on the appointed day Dan stood in the commodious, comfortably furnished, well lighted dining-room, taking a final glimpse at the apartment he liked best in all the house, ere he handed over the key to "Mr. Romeo," who had met him there for the purpose of taking possession of the premises on behalf of the mysterious client.

"I'll tell you what, but this is my notion of

comfort," said Dan, throwing himself into a luxurious easy chair by the fire. "Just fancy a man coming home after a hard day's work, having a good wash and his tea, and then smoking his pipe in a chair like this. Ha! And then fancy having a bookcase like that to go at! Whoever the party is, he has good taste, I will say that for him, or he wouldn't have gone in for all those volumes of *The Builder*, and such like works. I could be happy for ever nearly, with such a chair as this for nights, and such books to go at."

"Well, perhaps the queer client will ask you up sometimes, you know—I shouldn't wonder. By the way, you are expected up this evening; there is to be something like a house warming—a supper, and so on, and I was par-

ticularly instructed to see that you were here. Of course you will come?" said "Mr. Romeo," in an easy-going manner.

Dan's eyes brightened at the thought of meeting his unknown friend, but he hesitated whether to accept the invitation or not.

"Don't you think I had better slip in and see him some evening, when he's got settled a bit?" he said.

"Not unless you wish to put your foot in it. The queer client won't stand a refusal. You will not fail to come if you are wise, my friend."

"Then that settles it," said Dan—"I'll come."

"Oh, there's another thing. There is a deal of distress in Little Back Queer Street, isn't there?" asked "Mr. Romeo."

“More than ever, this Christmas. Some of them have only themselves to blame, but——”

“Well, never mind that. The queer client wishes you to take this purse, and to distribute either the money or the money’s worth, as you think fit, among the poor of your street. And that’s the end of my instructions. If you are going to town, we may as well go together. I have a cab waiting outside.”

Dan returned to town in high spirits, and was occupied throughout the afternoon with ordering coals, provisions, and many a little comfort for his poorer brethren in Little Back Queer Street.

“I should like to give Meg some of this money; I daresay she could do with it,” said Dan to himself—“but I shouldn’t like to vex

her. And no doubt I should find that ‘Mr. Romeo’ there if I went. I’ll see about it when I am dressed ready to go to the ‘Halls of Dazzling Light.’”

During the afternoon the wind dropped, and leaden-hued clouds obscured the sky. Before tea time it began to snow, and within a couple of hours, Manchester—irregularly built and unpicturesque as it is in many parts—presented as magnificent a spectacle as could possibly have been conceived under any combination of circumstances. Wherever the eye rested, it was on pure, white, glistening snow. The thoroughfares were blocked with it. Windows and doorways were made up with it. Peaks, gables, steeples, spires, towers, domes, chimneys—all were draped with it, and the fantastical shapes

into which the snow was whisked in places filled people of all ages and conditions with a feeling of wondering delight, that brought to mind many an old-fashioned Christmas in years gone by. Then the stars came out, and, viewed beneath the diamond-dusted sky, the scene was one whose marvellous beauty was the theme of general admiration.

In the evening, Dan put on the splendid attire, including the tall hat, in which he had figured on the previous Christmas.

“I’ll just slip in and see Meg, and then for the ‘Halls of Dazzling Light,’ ” he said, shutting his door, and putting the key in his pocket. But when he tried the door of Meg’s room, he found it was locked, and he could see that the room was in darkness.

"She's always out, now-a-days," said Dan, in a disappointed tone, as he went down the stairs.

* * * * *

In the "Halls of Dazzling Light" preparations were being made for supper. Meg and Charlie and Toady, with the parrot, had quietly left Little Back Queer Street at dusk, and had reached their future home in a cab about the time the snow had begun to fall. "Mr. Romeo" had gallantly escorted Mrs. and Miss Jarvey from Islington in a similar conveyance, and there they were, assembled in the warm, brilliantly-lighted dining-room, awaiting an arrival to which Meg attached much importance.

Mrs. and Miss Jarvey were in mourning for the son and brother whose loss they still lamented. Charlie and Toady were each experiencing the novelty of wearing a brand new suit, the former fairly revelling in a stand-up collar of such vast proportions that, when he threw himself into an easy chair (as he did every other minute), he did so at the risk of cutting his ears off. "Mr. Romeo," who had cheerfully undertaken the duties of master of the ceremonies, had elected to do honour to the occasion by appearing in evening dress; and having, moreover, taken particular pains with his hair, and provided himself with a sprig of holly for his button hole, he looked a heavier "swell" than usual. Meg wore a dress of a sober-hued soft material, her only ornament

being a small silver brooch with which she had fastened a bit of cherry ribbon at her throat.

The services of a “young person” had been secured for the kitchen, and as Mrs. Jarvey and Mary between them agreed to superintend the other arrangements, Meg was left free to devote herself to her expected guest. But now that the time had arrived she felt nervous and uncomfortable, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. She had anticipated some fun in suddenly undeceiving Dan, but when the bell rang, and she knew he was standing at the door, her courage deserted her, and at the last moment, instead of receiving him amongst her friends, as she had intended, she ran away, and took refuge in the back sitting-room.

This considerably upset the master of the

ceremonies, who scarcely knew how to act under these unlooked for circumstances.

“But, look here, you know, the joiner can’t be allowed to stand on the door mat all night,” said “Mr. Romeo.” “Something will have to be done with him.”

On which he rushed into the hall, and seizing Dan’s hat with one hand, and Dan’s hand with the other, he exclaimed ;—

“How d’yer do? Delighted to see you. Glorious weather, isn’t it? Hope you haven’t got very wet. You are just in time. We’ve been talking about you, you know. But I’m afraid the queer client is not very well. She, him, it—that is—’pon my honour I never was in such a fix—I’ll never be M.C. any more. Just go in there for a bit,” and pushing Dan

into the back sitting room, into which Meg had flown, “Mr. Romeo” quickly pulled the door to, and made for the dining room, exclaiming, as he entered it :—

“Now, I’ve either done a good thing, or made an awful mess of it.”

Before Dan could utter a word, Meg had thrown her arms round his neck, and was sobbing on his breast as though her heart would break. Dan was transfixed with astonishment. But she gave him no time to think, for, between her sobs, she told him of the motives that had prompted her to conceal from him the truth ; how that, but for his want of faith in her on that unhappy night when he left her, she would have told him everything ; how she had been true to him all through, and had longed for the day

when she might throw off the mask she had worn ; how that Mr. Romer, whom he had mistrusted so, had been the best and most disinterested of friends ; and how that she would rather have sacrificed wealth and have remained a poor seamstress in the garret in Little Back Queer Street than have lost Dan's love.

Whatever Dan said in reply, it may be accepted as a fact that within five minutes he whistled "Cheer, boys, cheer," so loudly, that the master of the ceremonies, in the next room, exclaimed, "I say, our friend the joiner's going it!"

When Meg rejoined her friends her face was radiant with joy, whilst Dan's happiness was expressed by a beaming countenance, and every

hair of his head, which in the excitement of the moment he had rubbed straight up from sheer force of habit. With characteristic impulsiveness, he went up to "Mr. Romeo," and, seizing his hand, nearly dislocated the young man's arm with the warmth of his greeting, as he said, "I thought you were a swell and a cad, but I've been mistaken, and ask your pardon. You're a gentleman, and I'm proud to know you."

"Much obliged, I am sure. You see you did well to accept the invitation of the queer client; I thought she had taken a fancy to you. I suppose you will smoke many a pipe in that chair now, eh?" said "Mr. Romeo," with a twinkle in his eye.

"I hope so, and it won't be my fault if you

don't smoke many another in the opposite one. But I can't say much about anything just yet. I feel as though I was only just coming round from having a tooth out under the influence of laughing gas. It will take me a while to realise all the good fortune that has come to me this Christmas Eve."

As the best means of removing this dazed feeling, Mrs. Jarvey recommended supper; and the idea meeting with general approval, supper was at once produced, and the party sat down to it. It was hardly fair to call a meal a supper, though, which so closely resembled an old-fashioned English Christmas dinner; but as Mrs. Jarvey had had the entire arrangement of it, she was perhaps entitled to call the meal by any name she preferred.

“I say, Dan, this is better than chair-knobs and pump-handles in Little Back Queer Street, isn’t it?” said Charlie, who surveyed the well-spread table with the keenest satisfaction.

“Yes,” replied Dan. “But however many years you and I live, I hope we shall never forget the day of small things.”

“Meg won’t. She isn’t half proud enough,” said the boy.

“Charlie!” said Meg, whose cheeks were still burning with blushes and the excitement she had gone through.

“Well, you’re not. But I’m not vexed with you, Meg; I’m too jolly to be vexed at anything. I’m not even sorry Mr. Jarvey turned us out of the old waggon that time, though I did think badly of him once.”

Mrs. Jarvey sighed at this reference to her lamented son, and Mary shook her head at Charlie as a caution not to refer again to so painful a subject.

They were a merry party, but whilst they were laughing heartily at a funny story "Mr. Romeo" had been telling, there came a terrific ring at the bell, which nearly frightened them out of their senses.

"Whoever can it be?" exclaimed Mrs. Jarvey.

"I have no idea," said Meg.

"Don't be alarmed," said "Mr. Romeo." "It's astonishing how quickly people scent out a newly-inhabited house. It's very likely a party who wishes to supply the family with milk—somebody who wants to introduce him-

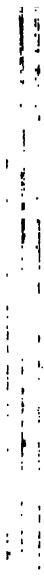
self as the proprietor of the little shop round the corner—the woman who goes out a-charing—a policeman who has found a cellar window open—anybody, in fact."

The "young person" had answered the door, and had let in a little dried-up man, who, but for the fact that he had a wooden leg, with which he made a good deal of noise as he stumped along the hall, might have been taken for the ghost of the late Mr. Jarvey. As the young person hesitated about allowing him to proceed, and, in fact, stood in his way at the room door, he exclaimed, in a very familiar voice, "Wot! ain't I to go in arter coming all this way to find 'em?"

The effect of this on the company in the room was electrical. Mrs. Jarvey fainted, Mary



"It was, indeed, no other than Mr. Jarvey in the flesh."—See page 205.



screamed, Meg looked frightened, and even “Mr. Romeo” turned pale. “Mr. Romeo” was the first to recover himself, and on a nearer inspection of the little dried-up man with a wooden leg, he remarked—“By Jove ! it *is* our eccentric friend come to life again. How d’yer do ? Hope you haven’t got very wet. So you didn’t die after all, eh ?”

“Not a bit of it.”

It was indeed no other than Mr. Jarvey in the flesh. When he had been embraced by his mother, and congratulated by the company all round, he thus explained himself—“Had a set-to wi’ the fever—put in horspital—party i’ the next bed wot had a set-to wi’ the fever died—cards over the beds got mixed—party wot died, buried i’ the name o’ John Jarvey——”

“Lor! the careless, wicked things,” exclaimed Mary.

“Went out o’ horspital—railway accident next—horspital again, leg off, an’ then another set-to wi’ the fever—but—[here Mr. Jarvey looked triumphant]—there worn’t no ’wakenings o’ conscience that time, old lady. Because why? Because I said I’d come out strong, an’ I done it, now *didn’t I?*”

Mr. Jarvey looked as though he had come out uncommonly weak physically, but everybody present was prepared to admit that he had kept his word, and had performed his part well.

Meg was delighted, and, after shaking hands with him several times, insisted upon his sitting down to supper immediately.

“Hold hard a minute!” said Mr. Jarvey;

"there's a box i' the cab outside wot must be fetched in an' handed over at once. It's a keepsake for Charlie, here."

When the box was produced and opened, it was found to contain a glass case in which figured a stuffed animal with glaring eyeballs, and a bird in its mouth, as though it had just committed an act of depredation in a neighbouring farmyard.

"There you are," said Mr. Jarvey. "A thing o' beauty an' a ji for ever. The lion's purwider, the on'y animal i' the forest wot the lion won't dewour. As large as life, an' twice as nat'r'al. Put it on the chimbley piece, an' it'll do you credit. Charlie, my boy, your hand! I told you it would be all right, and so it has been."

Mr. Jarvey was right. Everything had turned out well, and Meg, with a grateful heart, felt how true those words had been she had uttered in the old waggon—"God will take care of us."

By the time the bells began to ring out a merry peal in honour of the happiest, gladdest day in all the year having dawned, everybody had had so much to say that nobody seemed to have anything more to say, save—"God bless you—Good night!" Stay! the parrot had not yet exhausted all it had had to say in the course of the evening, and had still one more observation to make which was suggestive of the old yellow-painted caravan. It was:—

"All over for this time!"

